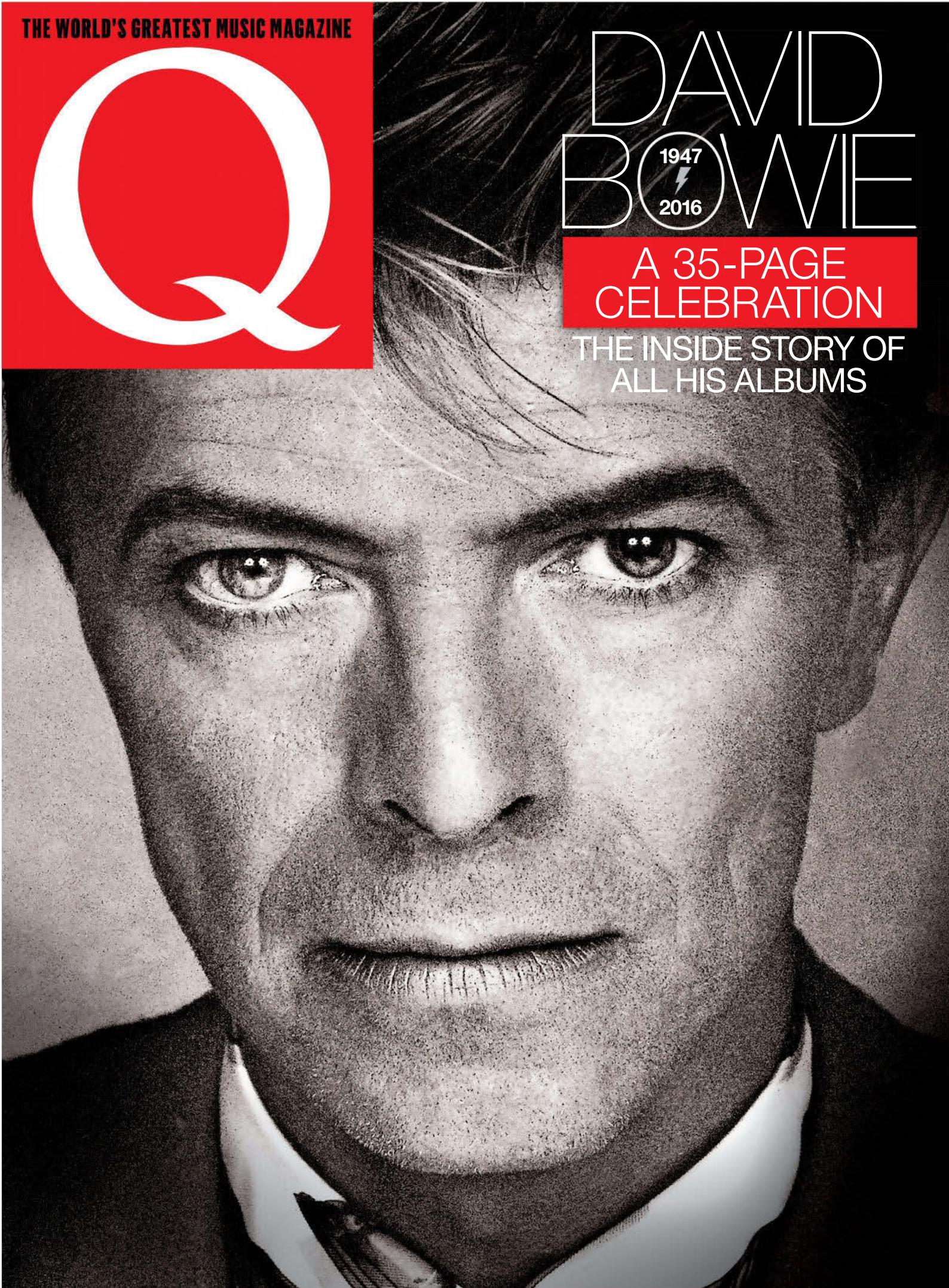
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COVER: BRIAN ARIS/CAMERAPRESS. PHOTOS THIS PAGE: STEVE NEAVES, ALEX LAKE, PEROU, SIMON SARIN

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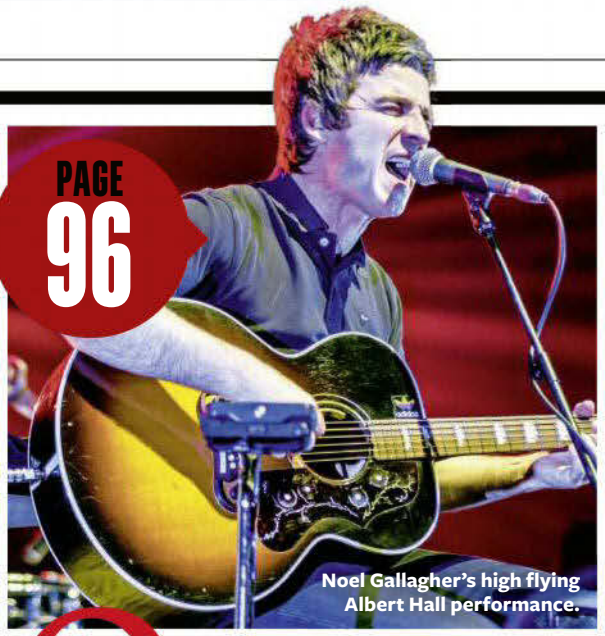

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PHOTOS: ALEX LAKE, EMI ARCHIVES, SIMON SARIN

JULIA HOLTER

HAVE YOU IN MY WILDERNESS

THE ALBUM OF THE YEAR

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MAYBE ONE OF YOUR

earliest experiences of David Bowie was watching him clown around in silly trousers with Mick Jagger during the video for Dancing In The Street. Maybe that wasn't the best place to start with Bowie.

It's likely that his name kept coming up when you read about the bands that did grab you though. As you were immersing yourself in Joy Division and New Order for instance, you might occasionally see mention of the "Berlin Trilogy". But what if your parents' record collection didn't have any Bowie? This was probably a pre-internet age and you couldn't just sample any music that took your fancy at the click of a mouse. No doubt you were relying on student loans and part-time jobs and were too focused on saving up for a Swervedriver album to take a risk on Jagger's mate with the silly trousers. If you were lucky, though, a flatmate will have heard you playing your Suede records and urged you to borrow his copy of Hunky Dory. Maybe, at last, you were in.

Perhaps *then* you understood that Bowie had always been around you, prodding, shaping and inspiring the bands that had carved you out. It's possible this was the point that you realised being a shy, awkward teenager would have been easier if you'd had Bowie with you back then.

As you got older, you probably started a family, humping your possessions into the loft to make room for children's toys. Perhaps, though, you're keeping back a box of the books, music and films that moulded you, to pass onto your kids when they're ready for inspiration. Maybe you've made sure there's some Bowie in there. Maybe that's why he'll always be around.

MATT MASON, SENIOR EDITOR (twitter **@MattMason_**)

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[...And their favourite Bowie song...]

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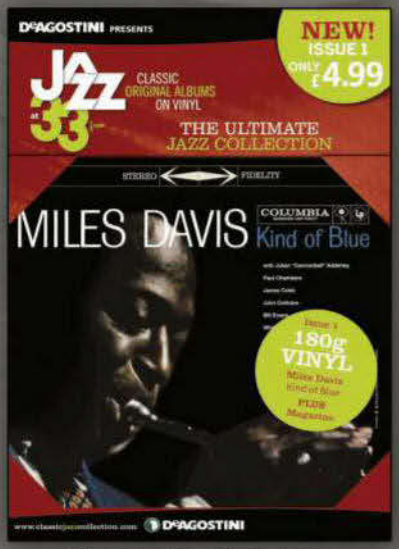

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AS SEEN ON TV

Q THE MONTH IN MUSIC

IF IT MATTERS, IT'S HERE.

LEMMY: 1945-2015

Fans and non-fans across the globe gathered to pay tribute to the late Ian "Lemmy" Kilmister earlier this month. Mark Blake celebrates an artist whose importance transcended his rock and roll persona.

It was 9 January, 2016, when Lemmy's coffin arrived at LA's Forest Lawn Memorial Cemetery. Sat on top were a bottle of Jack Daniel's, a pair of cowboy boots and an urn shaped like his trademark black brimmed hat.

Ozzy Osbourne, Dave Grohl, Slash, Metallica's Lars Ulrich and Lemmy's son, musician Paul Inder, were among those who gathered to pay their respects. Meanwhile, hundreds of fans made a pilgrimage to Lemmy's favourite LA watering hole, The Rainbow Bar & Grill, to leave packets of Marlboro Reds and bottles of bourbon at a shrine in his honour.

A live stream of the service shown on Motörhead's YouTube channel received a quarter of a million views. It was another public display of affection for a musical icon whose reputation transcended the rock genre.

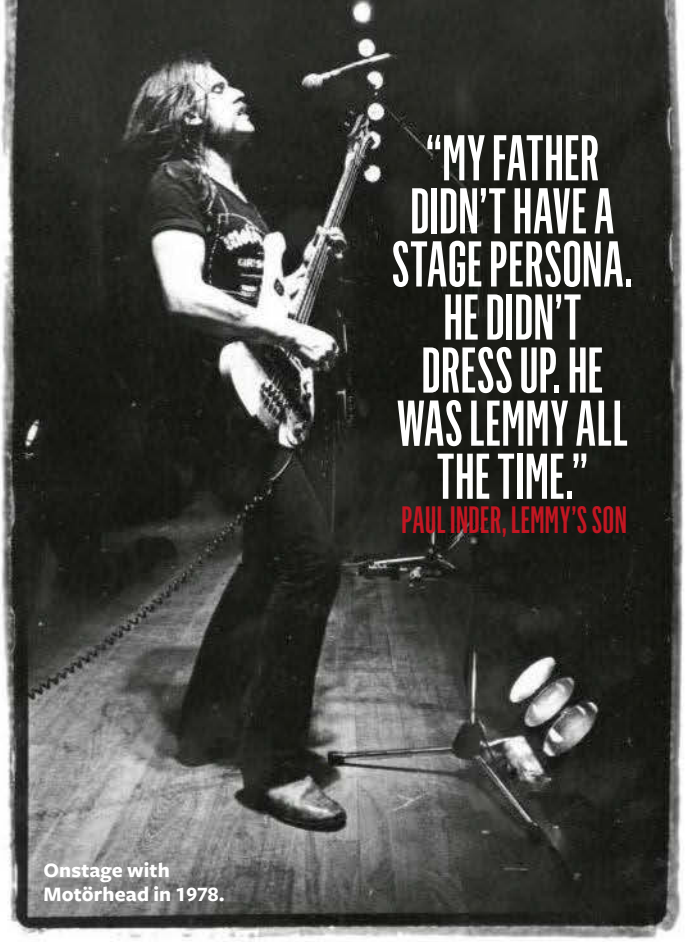
Lemmy's death from cancer on 28 December, 2015 had brought tributes from much further afield than his traditional fanbase. The Economist ran a lengthy obituary, and an online petition for the International Union Of Pure and Applied Chemistry to name a new chemical element "Lemmium" had almost 150,000 signatures.

In an industry steeped in fakery, people knew Lemmy was real. "My father didn't have a stage persona," explained Paul Inder. "He didn't dress up. He was Lemmy all the time."

Ian Fraser "Lemmy" Kilmister was the boy who left home to join the circus – and never went back. Born in Stoke-on-Trent on Christmas Eve 1945, he grew up with an absent father, a bad education and a mind-numbing job fitting nuts in a washing machine factory. "My earliest memory is shouting – at what and for what reason, I don't know," he said. "Probably a tantrum, or I may have been rehearsing." »

"The boy who left to join the circus – and never went back." Lemmy, London, 2010.

STEVE NEAVES



Onstage with Motörhead in 1978.

Then came Elvis Presley. Like David Bowie, Lemmy was part of the first-generation British rock'n'roll fans, growing up in a time *before* rock'n'roll. Lemmy, like Bowie, fell in love with the music, and used it as an escape route. He never married or embraced conventional family life. Instead, you sensed that even at the end Lemmy was still driven by the gnawing fear he could end up back in the factory.

Long before Motörhead, he was a Zelig-like presence on the British music scene. Lemmy saw The Beatles play Liverpool's Cavern Club; roadied for Hendrix, and sang with beat-pop hopefuls The Rockin' Vickers and psychedelic tabla player Sam Gopal in the '60s. Later, he joined space rockers Hawkwind and sang on their 1972 hit, Silver Machine, but his taste for amphetamines led to him being fired three years later.

Lemmy envisaged Motörhead as a blues band "like the MC5... with elements of Little Richard and Hawkwind." He lived in a squat and sang about taking speed and hanging out with Hell's Angels. That was his life. Come 1977, Motörhead were immune to punk's Year Zero cull, because they were more punk than punk – and who would dare challenge them anyway?

Then by the time their fourth album, Ace Of Spades, cracked the Top 5 in 1980, Motörhead were synonymous with heavy metal. With their long hair and gothic logo, they seemed to personify the genre. But the title of their 1987 album, Rock'N'Roll, was a more accurate description of where Lemmy's heart lay.

In fact, you can make the case for Ace Of Spades as a primal rock'n'roll 45 in the grand tradition of Jerry Lee Lewis's Great Balls Of Fire and Little Richard's Tutti Frutti. Lemmy also shared with Chuck Berry a skill for writing about teenage rebellion even when approaching pensionable age.

Motörhead were never pompous, and their frontman was always quick to level everything he sang about – be it sex, death or his own rock'n'roll-ness – with bone-dry gallows humour (see the drolly titled Killed By Death or I'm So Bad (Baby I Don't Care) with its opening couplet, "I make love to mountain lions/Sleep on red-hot branding irons..."). There was also a groove to Motörhead's best songs; a curious swing behind Lemmy's bowel-churning bass.

Like the best rock stars, Lemmy was complex and contradictory. His drug and alcohol consumption cemented his bad-boy persona. But it was offset by famously good manners and great kindness to fans. His collection of Nazi memorabilia made many uneasy, yet Lemmy approached his hobby with a historian's knowledge and eye for detail. He was never an apologist for Hitler's atrocities, but was fascinated by WWII and the world's continued "inability to learn from its mistakes." The title track of Motörhead's 1916 album addressed the horror of global conflict and was by no means his only moment of sombre reflection, 1993's Don't Let Daddy Kiss Me dealt with child abuse.

Lemmy had been ill for some time. He was diagnosed with hypertension, and had a defibrillator fitted in 2013. One of his few concessions was to swap Jack Daniel's and coke for a supposedly healthier option, vodka and orange. Otherwise, he carried on recording and touring, and was rewarded when Motörhead's last LP, 2015's Bad Magic, went Top 10. Lemmy died peacefully at home two days after learning he had inoperable brain and neck cancer.

Paul Inder revealed that his father had once discussed his funeral arrangements. Lemmy apparently wanted his coffin carried by three giant pallbearers on one side and three dwarves on the other "stumbling along to the theme tune from Laurel & Hardy." "You know the main thing in life? A sense of humour," said Lemmy once. "Lose that and you're done."

Lemmy's death marks the passing of one of rock's true originals. "He was enough of a rock star to be cool," said Lars Ulrich. "But not enough of a rock star to be uncool." What separated Lemmy from so many other so-called rock stars is that he always understood the difference. *MARK BLAKE*

(From left) Lemmy in The Rockin' Vickers in the mid-'60s; in Hawkwind, 1973; the classic Motörhead line-up, 1982; the service in LA, 9 January 2016.

ROSS HALFIN, GETTY

"He was always about being creative and jumping off the ledge." Don Cheadle as Miles Davis in biopic Miles Ahead.

SEE FOR MILES

DON CHEADLE on his forthcoming Miles Davis biopic, Miles Ahead.

There's a scene in Miles Ahead, a new feature film exploring the life of jazz titan Miles Davis, where Rolling Stone reporter Dave Brill warns the trumpet player that he doesn't want to file yet another "guns and drugs" story on the artist. "Why not?" replies Davis, looking puzzled.

In real life Davis wasn't above stoking his own mythology as jazz's meanest, coolest, sharpest-dressed cat, but he also had the lifestyle to back it up. Set in New York in the early '80s, when the 50-something artist was mired in cocaine addiction and hadn't released a record in five years, Miles Ahead pulls no punches when it comes to Davis's enthusiasm for chaos, firearms and drugs. Nor does it shy away from trying to make sense of his tirelessly self-critical and "difficult" musical genius.

"I wanted to make a movie that Miles would want to star in, as opposed to a movie documentary about the greatest hits of his life, which wasn't what he was about as an artist," explains Don Cheadle, who directs and stars in the film. "He was always about being creative and jumping off the ledge. I wanted to make a movie that *felt* like Miles and gave an experience of him. And use music from any time of his career so it wasn't chronological."

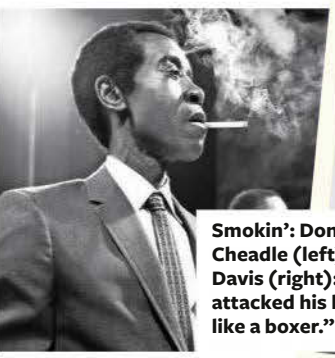
The plot involves an attempt by journalist Dave Brill, played by Ewan McGregor, to secure an interview with the reclusive Davis, but who instead ends up as his accomplice in a crazed bid to retrieve a session tape stolen by Davis's record label. Cue a Blaxploitation-style orgy of punch-ups, drug deals and car chases, beginning with an edifying opening scene where McGregor, door-stepping his target, gets thumped in the eye by the coked-up musician.

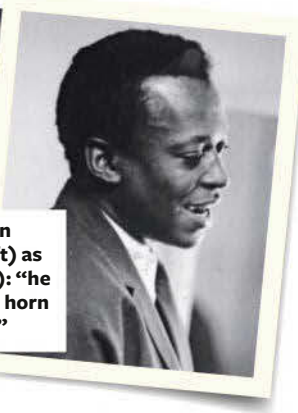
As the story unfolds, Davis's love of pugilism becomes a metaphor for his struggles, musical and personal, with the film reaching its climax at a boxing match. "The fight angle goes right through," says Cheadle, a devoted fan who has spent eight years trying to get the movie made. "Miles was a boxer himself, and that was reflected in the way he attacked his horn and the way he practised."

Running parallel to the main action is a flashback story charting Davis's development as a musician in the '50s and '60s, and his doomed marriage to dancer and muse Frances Taylor. Surviving her first husband – Davis died in 1991 – she and the Davis estate have given their full support to the film. "I told her I was going to make her more of a badass in the movie than she ever was - which was fine with her."

Cheadle, who never met Davis but saw him play live in the '80s, not long after his "comeback" from reclusion, says that playing the artist has only added to his already gargantuan respect for his extraordinary creativity. "Miles never saw himself as a jazz musician, just a musician, period," he explains of the man who famously fused jazz with rock and funk. "If he was around today he'd probably be collaborating with Kendrick Lamar or Jack White. You can only imagine what sounds he'd be making." It's a shame Davis isn't around to see such an aptly creative take on his life. *PAT GILBERT*

■ *Miles Ahead will be in cinemas in April.*





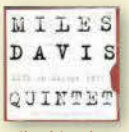
Smokin': Don Cheadle (left) as Davis (right): "he attacked his horn like a boxer."

DON DIGS MILES

CHEADLE'S PICK

Kind Of Blue (1959)
"Everyone has to go for this," says the actor. "It changed music and established Miles as a real m force." The best selling jazz LP of all time, Kind Of Blue moved the genre away from hard bop and into modal territory. Eloquent, beautiful and timeless.

Seven Steps To Heaven (1963)
Davis's last album to feature standards rather than originals, it sees the horn man emerge with a new band and an ambitious mind set. "His music is ripe and open; he's trying different things," notes Cheadle.



Live In Europe 1967: The Bootleg Series Vol. 1 (2011)
Miles hits the road with his "second great quintet" – saxophonist Wayne Shorter, pianist Herbie Hancock and rhythm section Ron Carter and Tony Williams. Cheadle: "A lot of the stuff he did in Europe with those guys, like the stuff here at Antwerp, it was just crazy."

Bitches Brew (1970)
"You absolutely have to have this record," froths the actor of the experimental [illegible] LP that began the '70s craze for jazz fusion. A true musical landmark.

Tutu (1986)
Originally conceived as a collaboration with Prince, Tutu took a left turn into '80s funk and R&B, replete with synthesizers and drum machines. "This was after his 'comeback' – a totally new take on him, the stuff on this is wild!"

GETTY

Just another bants-filled day at the office... Bobby Gillespie (left) and Andrew Innes in Primal Scream's new central London HQ.

GAELLE BERI

In The Studio

I CAN'T EXPLAIN

PRIMAL SCREAM's Bobby Gillespie is vexed but he can't articulate why. So he made an electro-rock LP about it.

Standing on a side street off Piccadilly Circus, Bobby Gillespie is explaining the "psycho-geography" of Primal Scream's new central London studio HQ. "There used to be a pub up there," he points, "where Marx and Engels decided to write The Communist Manifesto. And see this yard, this used to be The Scene club where *[Clash producer]* Guy Stevens was the DJ." It's a fitting location for a band who've lived at the crossroads of rock'n'roll mythology and revolution rhetoric for the past three decades. The studio itself is four flights up a former brothel, still not fully lived-in after landlords evicted the Scream from their Primrose Hill base of 20 years, "Das Bunker", now razed for flats. "The old place was more funky," mourns Gillespie, whose homely touches here amount to a photo of actor James Coburn taped to the wall. ("Cos he's one of the coolest guys who ever lived.") Otherwise, a stack of framed vintage film posters remain unhung through lack of wall space. Q suggests they could line the length of the stairwell. "Aye, they could," ponders Gillespie. "But some cunt'd nick 'em."

We're here to talk about Chaosmosis, Primal Scream's 11th album. Or that was the plan. Gillespie apologises that he's having "a weird day" and while happy to talk about absolutely anything, James Coburn included, the album itself draws a blank. "My head's not really around this at the moment," he begins. Ten conversationally opaque minutes later: "I don't like giving away information." Until, eventually: "The songs are about the inability to communicate. And there's nothing you can do about it, you're helpless."

Fittingly, Gillespie lets the album do the talking. Opener Trippin' On Your Love may sound like a lost song from the baggy summer of 1991, but it's a deceptively upbeat exception. For the most part, Chaosmosis drowns its sorrows in electronica, save the odd detour into folk (Private Wars), psychedelic samba (I Can Change) and the Stooges-y disco of Golden Rope. The latter finds Gillespie repeating, "I know that there is something wrong with me." Thirteen times. Add this to the '80s synth-bopping (Feeling Like A) Demon Again ("Hurt the ones I loved the most"), the infectious 100% Or Nothing ("The antidepressants don't anti-depress") and the dancey yet despairing Carnival Of Fools ("Terrible day when you walked out on me") and we've potentially the soundtrack of a 53-year-old man not so much having a weird day but a worried life. "Whatever's going on in my life, I write a song about," he discloses. "The theme is depressive realism. It's all falling apart. Everything's falling apart."

> "IT'S ABSORBING ALL THE WRECKAGE OF THE WORLD." BOBBY GILLESPIE

Gillespie also admits he borrowed the album's title, but doesn't want to tell us from where (that's OK, Google will: it's a book by French psychologist Félix Guattari). As for his definition of Chaosmosis? "It's trying to absorb all the detritus and the wreckage of the world, everything life throws at you externally and internally, then turning it into an artwork which is your resistance to what's happening." He shuts down again. "But I'm just not ready to talk about any of this." Unable to communicate about an album on the inability to communicate. For Gillespie, Chaosmosis is a way of life. *SIMON GODDARD*

IN THE PIPELINE

ADDING MORE COWBELL AS WE SPEAK...

WHO: LCD SOUNDSYSTEM
LCD's live return at Coachella this year will be followed by a brand new album. "We're not just having some reunion tour. We're releasing a record," said James Murphy.
DUE: 2016

WHO: RADIOHEAD
Is their new LP imminent? Last October, the group set up a company, Dawn Chorus LLP, something which they have done just a few months prior to the release of their last two albums.
DUE: TBC

WHO: ANDRE 3000
Following his recent collaboration with Erykah Badu, the OutKast man wants to return to music. "I'm really interested in figuring out some type of music to do," he reports.
DUE: TBC

WHO: RAY DAVIES
Davies's new album will be based on his 2013 memoir Americana: The Kinks, The Road And The Perfect Riff. "It's a real challenge... it's very unusual to adapt a book into a record."
DUE: Summer

WHO: ANTONY AND THE JOHNSONS
Now billing himself under transgender identity, Anohni, Antony Hegarty's first album in six years, Hopelessness, deals with climate change and environmental issues.
DUE: Spring

In The Studio

ORIGINAL SYNTH

Disillusioned with working in Hollywood, French electro whizz M83 returns to what he does best.

A grandiose sweep of shimmering synthesizers and wistful electro-pop that could have soundtracked a long lost John Hughes film, French band M83's sixth album, Hurry Up, We're Dreaming, rode a wave of '80s revivalism to international acclaim and success in 2011.

Not only did the album go platinum in the US, but Anthony Gonzalez, who effectively is M83, found this opening doors for him in Hollywood. He was invited to score dystopian Tom Cruise film Oblivion in 2013, M83's music was used in the last Hunger Games instalment and in 2015 he worked with Haim on a song for sci-fi thriller Insurgent. Given the undoubted cinematic quality of M83's output it would be a career made for him, you might think. Except, well, not really.

"Doing this one-off fee thing is really exciting at the beginning and then you realise you are working for a big corporation and you are not super-happy about the results because you are not the boss," he says of the Haim collaboration. "They are sweet girls and I really enjoyed working with them, but that is just something that you do for the money."

His reaction was to spring out of the corner he was at risk of painting himself into. Released in April and currently untitled, the new M83 album toggles between the somnolent sound of previous albums and effervescent electro-funk, adding in orchestras and saxophones to create a curious confection.

Opener, Do It Try It has an Italo-house piano figure crocheted with slap bass, Laser Gun is clattering yet despondent pop, For The Kids mixes spoken word with mournful sax, while the bouncy Moon Crystal is a dead ringer for the theme to '80s cop show Hill Street Blues. More unusual still, Bibi The Dog opens with deadpan French singing before jackknifing into sped-up vocals, like David Bowie's The Laughing Gnome. "I just wanted a broken and fun dance song," Gonzalez explains. "I liked the idea of a broken robot singing on the song."

In blunt contrast to M83's wraith-like synth washes and nuanced layering style, the biggest thing to happen to electronic music since their last album is the vehement rise of thundering EDM. Gonzalez is, frankly, horrified at how it has created a new centre of gravity for music in his adopted homeland. "It's a matter of making music for sluts and bros," he says with an inadvisably rum turn of phrase. "This is the kind of music that makes me sick."

He suggests that the next album will probably be another four or five years in the making as he wants to have a series of concurrent side projects on the boil. He has yet to decide what they will be, but scoring the soundtrack to EDM: The Movie seems somewhat doubtful. *EAMONN FORDE*

M83's Anthony Gonzalez: don't let all those guitars fool you, it's still really synthy.

LION BABE

With their famous friends and mighty hair, Lion Babe are mixing it up to make the sound of now.

Star Wars Stormtroopers march across Alan Carr's Chatty Man studios, Carr festively dressed as Mother Mary. Watching these high-camp high jinks, in the wings, are New York's art-pop electro-soul duo Lion Babe, already favourites of (and collaborators with) Mark Ronson, Disclosure and Pharrell Williams. "I'm looking for Chewbacca, I'll blend in," cackles vocalist Jillian Hervey, The One With The Hair.

In 2016, Lion Babe will not only blend in, stylishly, to the cultural atmosphere but lead it onwards, theirs the unique sound of now – which is to say, ironically, the digital distillation of five decades of old-school sounds.

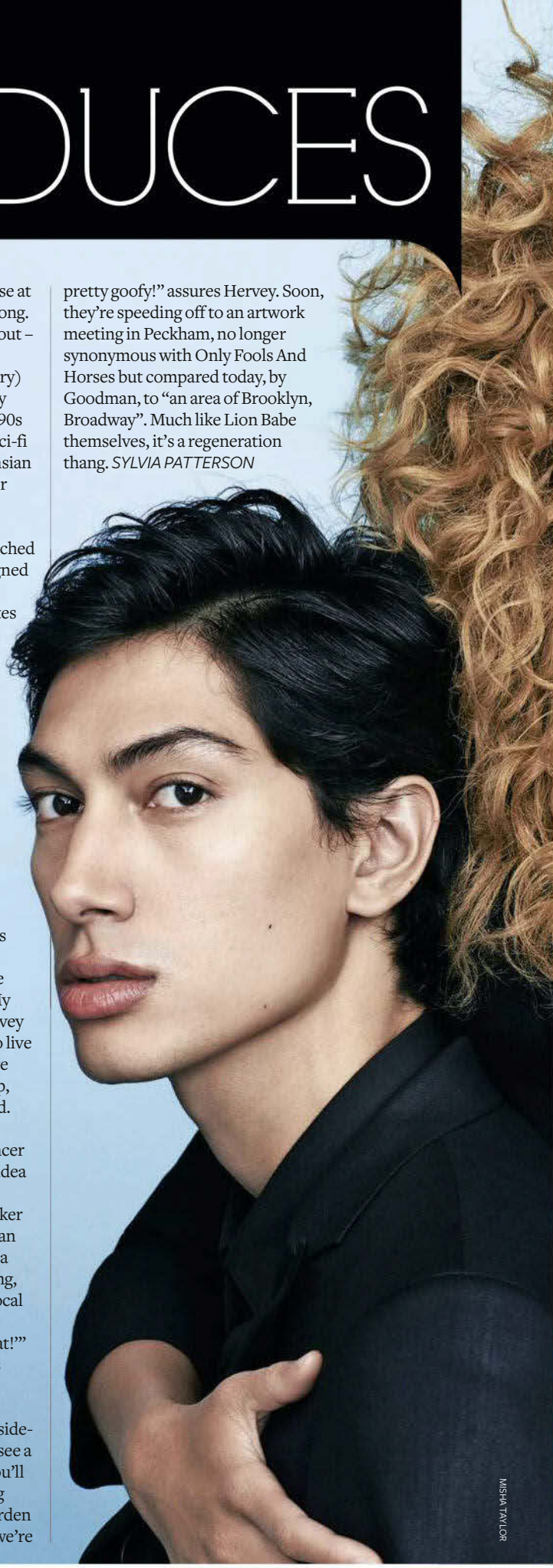
"Everyone's looking to the past, everything's jumbled," notes musician/producer Lucas Goodman from a backstage sofa, a permanently smiling 27-year-old in brothel creepers and pea-green retro overcoat. "Mixing it all up, that's the sign of the times," adds Hervey, a warm, stupendously glamorous 26-year-old in silver platform heels, black jump-suit and signature enormous hair. "This is not the classic mane," she notes of today's wavy coils. "It's more... lion-chic. I have many manes! My main purpose at first was to look like a lion. Wild, strong. Now, it's reflective of what we're about – embracing your own uniqueness."

Debut album, Begin (due February) is unique alright, a bubbling alchemy of '70s funk, '80s Prince, Daisy Age '90s hip-hop, 2000s R&B and futuristic sci-fi sorcery, including a stunning, Smithsian guitar on the spectral Little Dreamer and the slinky, Pharrell-produced Wonder Woman (ever vigilant to groovy newcomers, Pharrell approached them in 2012, even before they'd signed to Interscope later that year). "This was pre-Daft Punk, pre-Happy," notes Hervey, "we had no idea he was about to... take over the world!"

Lion Babe are all about "vibes": of positivity, of "sharing inspiration" and especially the 1970s. "It seemed the most fun back then," decides Goodman. "With a freedom," notes Hervey, "and that goes back to our parents."

Their parents were acutely fashionable, both dads with spectacular Afros, "my dad", beams Goodman, "was totally Mr Funky, with platform shoes" (he became Muhammad Ali's PR) while Hervey's mum is seven million album-selling singer/actress Vanessa Williams, the first black Miss America in 1984. "My mom looked awesome!" laughs Hervey even if, as a teenager, she had a lot to live up to. "I wore myself out as a teenage girl," she nods, "you beat yourself up, compare yourself to the entire world. When I let that go, doors started to open." Originally a professional dancer and performance artist, she had no idea she could sing until 2012, when she collaborated with producer/beatmaker and MySpace acquaintance Goodman in New York, looking to soundtrack a performance. A striking, Erykah Badu-esque vocal soared forth. "I was, 'Woah, let's record that!'" marvels Goodman. As a dancer, Hervey can, incidentally, do the vertical splits, legs-beside-the-ear thing. "Come see a show," she beams, "you'll definitely see some leg action!" Is it ever a burden being this cool? "Oh, we're pretty goofy!" assures Hervey. Soon, they're speeding off to an artwork meeting in Peckham, no longer synonymous with Only Fools And Horses but compared today, by Goodman, to "an area of Brooklyn, Broadway". Much like Lion Babe themselves, it's a regeneration thang. *SYLVIA PATTERSON*

> ***In a nutshell:***
> **Electro-glam sci-fi-soul, astride a lion in Studio 54, in 1977.**
>
> ***For fans of:***
> **Disclosure, Prince, Beyoncé**
>
> ***Get this track:***
> **Little Dreamer**



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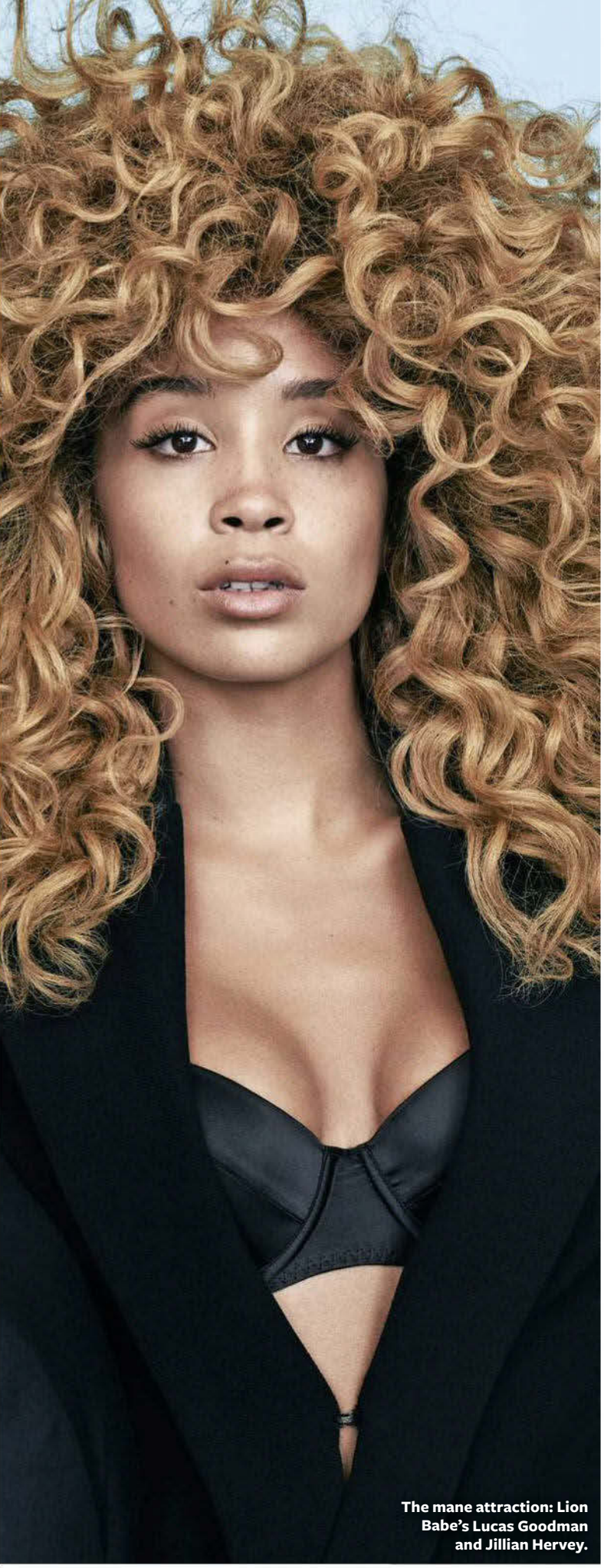

The mane attraction: Lion Babe's Lucas Goodman and Jillian Hervey.

A shore thing: Coasts unashamedly set their sights on the the big time.

COASTS

Stadium-primed indie with an EDM twist.

Incomprehensible. That's the word Coasts' singer Chris Caines and guitarist Liam Willford use to describe their journey from university students pursuing acting/directing careers to members of one of 2016's most promising new bands. "When we first met we didn't know how to play our instruments," recalls Caines.

"We were terrible," adds Willford. "We tried to make music we thought would get us signed, but it wasn't working. We scrapped three years of work. We said, 'If we're going to do this, we need to make music that makes us feel good.'"

Eventually finding the solution on the musical map between Foals' intense rock longitude and Bastille's pop sheen latitude, Coasts have since sold 100,000 tracks on iTunes, scored four million streams and delivered sets at Glastonbury, Reading/Leeds and Coachella. Things only look set to grow following the release of their eponymous debut, out in September. Filtering their dynamic sound through a roster of world-class producers – including Adele collaborator Fraser T Smith – songs like Modern Love and Oceans gleam with soaring choruses and shimmering guitars.

That any of this has transpired, however, is miraculous.

"Have you got wi-fi on your phone, mate?" asks Willford. "Type in: 'Ben' 'Street' and 'Daily Mail'."

This particular concoction of words retrieves a news article from 2013 with a headline beginning: "BACKPACKER WHO BROKE HIS NECK AND FRACTURED HIS SPINE" and a picture of their drummer's horrifically scarred countenance. Street quit Coasts initially, opting instead to go travelling – he was in Nicaragua when he accidentally plunged nearly 20ft while climbing beside a waterfall.

"He came out of the water saying, 'I have hair over my eyes,' but it was actually his scalp!" says Caines with a wince.

"He almost died," nods Willford.

Oddly, this accident arguably reversed their fortunes. While still recovering, Street rejoined Coasts to help nail the EP that led to a deal with Warners. Quietly confident rather than cocky, the pair believe they could headline Glastonbury.

"I want our band to be one of the biggest bands in the world," declares Chris.

"Ten years ago that would have been the worst thing you could say," adds Liam. "But now you've got The 1975 and Catfish And The Bottlemen – British bands who *want* to headline stadiums. Our aspirations are huge."

Incomprehensible as it might once have been, Coasts now have the songs to match them. *GEORGE GARNER*

In bloom: (from left) Jacob Faber, Nick Kivlen and Julia Cumming.

SUNFLOWER BEAN

Apocalypse-fixated, chess-playing New Yorkers cook up intoxicating psych-rock stew.

In between modelling for Yves Saint Laurent and singing/playing bass for Sunflower Bean, 19-year-old Julia Cumming spends an awful lot of time thinking about drowning.

"I keep have recurring dreams about it," she says, matter-of-factly over a quinoa salad in a Brooklyn coffee shop. Like singer/guitarist Nick Kivlen and drummer Jacob Faber (both just 20), they have a mild preoccupation with end times. "I have a fear about New York going underwater. I really don't want there to be a global flood. I hope when the end of the world comes, we die in flames."

"WE'RE DEFINITELY NOT COOL."

While some bands claim to play like it could be their last night on Earth, Sunflower Bean actually think it too. The trio was formed in 2013 by school friends Kivlen and Faber. Initially, they worked with a revolving cast of bassists until they poached Cumming, who at the time was in short-lived NYC folkies Supercute!. "We didn't want Sunflower Bean to be a bro-band," says Kivlen.

With the line-up solidified, they booked around 50 shows in 2014 by themselves. That self-starting attitude has borne fruit with their debut album, Human Ceremony – an intoxicating collection of classic rock riffs and references, refracted through modern psychedelia, like early Tame Impala playing early Black Sabbath.

It's an influence they wear proudly, and very literally, on their sleeves. A track from the band's Show Me Your Seven Secrets EP, from 2015, was named after Kevin Parker's Aussie outfit. Today, Faber proudly wears a Led Zeppelin IV T-shirt, while avowed glam devotee Cumming sports a homemade T.Rex T-shirt that quotes Cosmic Dancer's opening line, "I was dancing when I was 12."

Their tastes put Sunflower Bean admirably out of step with their own peer group. "I don't know one Kendrick Lamar song," says a mildly embarrassed Cumming. "We're definitely not cool," adds Kivlen, who has a chess club membership to prove as much. "We get together in a church basement and most of the other guys are between 50-70 years old. Me and a friend had our nails painted once, and one of the old guys said, 'Man, what's wrong with you kids?'"

Whatever it is, the members of Sunflower Bean shouldn't worry about putting it right just yet. *GEORGINA NEWMAN*

INCOMING

This month, Q's Chris Catchpole loses his mind to weirdo psych-folk, gets seduced by a slippery slow jam and wonders how to play shoegazing on a banjo.

HERON OBLIVION
ORIAR

"Psych" has become the prefix du jour for anyone with a slightly wobbly take on '60s garage rock. San Franciscans Heron Oblivion warrant the term in the properly psychotropic sense of the word, though. A freeform wig-out of olde-worlde folk weirdness and thunderous wah-wah guitar splurges, Obiar sounds like Pentangle and Black Mountain gorging on magic mushrooms at a woodland commune.
Hear it: Available on Sub Pop now.

GOSH PITH
GOLD CHAIN

Spare a thought for record store employees trying to stack Gosh Pith's forthcoming EP. "Do we stick it in Alt-R&B? Witch house? Chill wave?" With a sound that falls somewhere between Animal Collective and Frank Ocean, the Detroit duo prefer "cosmic trap" themselves. Which works nicely, given Gold Chain's warped hip-hop.
Hear it: Available on Soundcloud.

THE KVB
IN DEEP

Since forming in 2010, Berlin-based duo The KVB have been knocking out albums with the efficiency of a Japanese car factory. Taken from their fifth album in just five years, In Deep perfects their icy, post-punk blueprint – gloomy vocals, junk shop synths and a guitar that mimics the sound of a circular saw being dropped down a well.
Hear it: Available on Invada Records now.

JOY AGAIN
HOW YOU FEEL

Joy Again's Arthur Shea claims he wrote How You Feel on a friend's banjo about his inability to talk to a girl. Given its lovelorn melodies, the second part you can definitely hear. Quite how you'd play the lilting, shoegazing bits on a banjo remains to be seen.
Hear it: Available on Lucky Number now.

PUBLIC MEMORY
RINGLEADER

Robert Toher's previous band Eraas used to create doom-laden post-rock. Taken from his excellent debut solo album, Ringleader delivers similarly spooked atmospheres via a gut-rupturing synth-bass drone and snatches of disembodied vocals. Mesmeric.
Hear it: Available on Soundcloud.

Let's Do Lunch With...

KURT VILE

Everyone loves pizza. Just maybe not as much as Kurt Vile does. Make his a margherita…

"WRITING SONGS COMES AND GOES. BUT MAINLY IT COMES."

Kurt Vile likes the idea of being completely straight one day. He thinks that waking in the morning with a clear head sounds like the ultimate high. As he's explaining this, a waiter approaches Vile's table at the York & Albany, a gastropub owned by Gordon Ramsay in North London, with the coffee that the 36-year-old from Philadelphia has ordered. "I'll have a beer as well," says Vile. "What styles you got? Bitburger? I'll take one of those!" He lets out his cackling cartoon giggle, a laugh that sounds like a child supervillain being told off at primary school. Sobriety can wait.

Vile has spent too long with a woozy haze around him to clear the air just yet. He has released six albums since 2008, each honing his sound of dense finger-plucking and fuzzy-headed melancholy. Early albums blended his love of classic American rock with gentle psychedelia while his most recent album, last year's b'lieve i'm goin down, was his take on homespun Americana. The stripped-down record proved to be the breakthrough he's been threatening.

The making of b'lieve... was a "high toxicity" experience. Vile kept his alcohol levels up as he went straight into a US tour, drinking a lot before going onstage to ease his nerves, and now he is locked into an on-the-road routine of sleeping until 5pm and having his "morning" coffee as he stands onstage waiting to soundcheck. He finds it hard to keep up with himself. "When five at night seems like seven in the morning, it's really weird," he says, "and your breakfast is dinner, then you play the gig and have some beers and realise all you had was a stew for breakfast... which was dinner." But he likes being on tour. He stays up until eight in the morning on his bus after the rest of the band and crew have hit their bunks. It's something he attributes to being from a very large family (one of 10 children): when everyone else is asleep, it's the perfect time to get some peace and quiet.

Tonight he is playing a sold-out show at Camden's Electric Ballroom and he has chosen to eat here as he's heard they have the best pizza in the area. With his stoner drawl, long hair and constant look of stupefied awe, Vile looks like the real-life inspiration for Otto, the stoner bus driver in The Simpsons. Accordingly, *of course* Kurt Vile's favourite food is pizza. He's like a pizza preacher. "I think every American's favourite food, deep down, is pizza," he says. "Even if you're like, 'I'm so over pizza!', the next thing you're like, 'Let's get some pizza!'" He speaks wisely about pizza. He enjoys New York-style pizza, which is "awesome", and seems impressed when the margherita he's ordered arrives. "This looks classic," he says, inspecting it. "This seems like a fancy pizza establishment. Gourmet-style pizza." If he had to pick one type, it would be Greek-style pizza, a local speciality in Lansdowne, the Philadelphia suburb where Vile lives with his wife Suzanne and their two daughters, Awilda and Delphine. "It's greasier and thicker," he says, "it's the best."

His family takes good care of him. He used to arrive home from tour "completely depleted" from night after night of heavy partying, but now he picks his moments sparingly. When he gets home, he recharges by chilling on the couch with his girls next to him, reading and drawing. He likes travelling with his family. Awilda is five now, kindergarten age. "But we're gonna home school her, cos that way we can go anywhere and they can meet me anywhere," he says. "We can go all over the world."

Vile has been a prolific songwriter since he was a teenager, amassing so many songs that it wasn't until his fourth album, Smoke Ring For My Halo, that he finally had to write some new ones to release. However, he is currently undergoing a slight writer's block. This sort of thing used to worry him, but now he just lets it pass him by. "It'll come eventually. It comes and goes. But it mainly comes," he says. With that, he asks for a box for his half-finished pizza and heads back towards the venue, back into his own little world. He's not quite ready to emerge from the fug yet. *NIALL DOHERTY*

Favourite restaurant?
"A place in my suburb called Paul Revere's Pizza. It's the best."
Death Row dinner?
"I'd be like, 'Go to Paul Revere's Pizza and give me a large plain pizza and a large sausage pizza!'"
Favourite condiment?
"You're not supposed to have mayonnaise, it's the worst, so it's the one you want."
Breakfast of kings?
"When I'm home, I have over-easy eggs with a swirl of sriracha *[hot chilli sauce]*. It's called the daddy special. The kids eat what I eat, and my youngest, Delphine, is into the sriracha."

ILLUSTRATION: WELOVEYOYO.COM

Column

WHO'S SELLING OUT?

Damon Albarn gets an OBE. Boo! Keith Flint goes on a trail hunt. Hiss! Since when should all musicians have to adhere to a uniform set of left-wing principles, argues Dorian Lynskey?

If you searched Twitter for news of Damon Albarn's OBE on New Year's Day, the service's autocorrect function was instantly revealing. Typing his name into the search box elicited the suggestion "Damon Albarn sellout." Many people felt that Albarn had betrayed some core principle by accepting a gong but what, exactly, was he selling out?

It would be hypocritical for staunch republicans such as Morrissey or the Pet Shop Boys to take OBEs, but royalty has never been one of Albarn's bugbears. Some people felt that it sat badly with his refusal to meet Tony Blair in 1997, but keeping New Labour at arm's length has nothing to do with the honours system. The criticisms echoed the rumble of disapproval when PJ Harvey received her MBE from the Queen two years after releasing the anti-war Let England Shake, and they were just as tenuous. Albarn's attackers were projecting on to him a vague package of assumptions about how left-wing musicians should think and behave, but he's a mainstream star who's written operas and musicals. He's not Jason Williamson from Sleaford Mods.

Also at the start of the year, The Prodigy's Keith Flint incurred the wrath of keyboard vigilantes Anonymous after the Daily Mail's diary column claimed that he had taken up foxhunting. Anonymous, apparently confusing The Prodigy with the Baader-Meinhof Gang, said in a daft YouTube video, "Who would have thought Keith, of all people, would turn out to be a traitorous fuckwit? Throughout the years The Prodigy made music about rebelling against the establishment." Flint, who owns horses, later insisted that he went on one ride but no animals were hunted and he didn't like it enough to do it again, which is a relief. Still, there's no logical reason why the apolitical, country-dwelling Flint should oppose hunting any more than there's one why Albarn should spurn an OBE. But then moral judgements don't start with logic – they spring from a feeling.

In his book The Righteous Mind, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt argues that people make moral judgements instinctively ("seeing-that") and rationalise them later ("reasoning-why"). He describes the process as "rapid intuitive judgement ("That's just wrong!") followed by slow, often tortuous justifications." People then fool themselves into thinking that the justifications came first.

It happens all the time. During U2's gas-guzzling 360° tour, someone told me that Bono was a hypocrite for talking about the environment while burning through thousands of tons of carbon. I pointed out that Bono campaigned on African development issues rather than environmental ones. He retorted that climate change affected Africa and therefore Bono was still a hypocrite. He'd made the intuitive judgement and he was going to rationalise it by hook or by crook. Similarly, John Lydon never wrote a lyric that would rule out advertising butter, and there's certainly nothing in Bryan Ferry's aspirational songs to make you think he wouldn't approve of his son going fox-hunting, but many fans felt let down anyway. That's just wrong!

"Tally ho, geez!" Keith Flint went riding with the local trail hunt in Essex.

Badge of honour: Damon Albarn received his OBE last month.

"DAMON ALBARN'S WRITTEN OPERAS AND MUSICALS. HE'S NOT IN SLEAFORD MODS."

In a way, it's encouraging that a word like "sellout" still has traction in 2016 because you can't be disappointed unless you believe in the first place. That disappointment isn't really about expecting your favourite musicians to share your politics: that's been a mug's game ever since radical protesters banked on The Rolling Stones writing songs for the revolution. (Ask Sir Mick Jagger how that panned out.) It's about craving a certain oppositional glamour that transcends the everyday. I think Albarn deserves his OBE but I don't particularly want to see a photograph of him all dressed up at the Palace. And I'd rather picture Flint as a demented rave gonk than be reminded that he's a wealthy middle-aged man who lives in the countryside. But that's my issue, not theirs. Musicians can't run their lives according to the ill-defined and often unrealistic standards that fans saddle them with.

Perhaps the only way to square that circle is to be honest about our intuitive responses and to forget about the contorted rationalisations. Recognising that your disappointment is illogical doesn't mean you can't feel it. There are limits, though. If Jay Z campaigns for Donald Trump or Morrissey shoots a lion, then go for it.

ALAMY

Absolute Radio

THE SUNDAY NIGHT MUSIC CLUB

IN ASSOCIATION WITH Q

And over to Bob Dylan with the weather...

LET'S GO ELEMENTAL

Sunday Night Music Club host Danielle Perry sticks a finger in the air and wonders why there are so many songs about the weather.

As soon as the Christmas clearance bins have been emptied, we're engulfed by the next season of festivities. Bloody St Valentine. Love is in the air, everywhere you look, and actually, everywhere you listen. Lyrically, the majority of popular music is about matters of the heart. A song comes on the radio while the rain lashes on the window and either you've just been dumped or you've just found the "one" – and you know what? *Every* lyric means the world to you. "It's like it's been written for *my* situation." We've all been there.

Why are there so many songs about love? Is it because we don't go around citing poetry any more? Or is it the one thing that we all actually have in common. Either way, it can be a smart route to success. Tapping into universal matters of the heart can mean widespread sales and a bigger audience for your music. You might even get really lucky and find your song soundtracking the big scene in a movie.

I was sat in the car on the M25 the other day thinking about which songs *aren't*, ostensibly, about love. Tequila by Terrorvision sprang to mind, but let's not talk about that. But I did notice that weather came up a lot. Another thing we all have in common. Travis were on to an absolute winner with Why Does It Always Rain On Me?. Every rainy Glastonbury and every rainy Wimbledon it becomes an undercover national anthem. And let's not forget the likes of Riders On The Storm, Ain't No Sunshine, Mr Blue Sky, Purple Rain... they're huge records, and have all been in the library at the past 13 radio stations I've worked at.

Once I started researching this, I realised that there are people other than me spending *a lot* of time on this very subject. In July, a group of leading academics revealed that 163 of Bob Dylan's 542 songs – 30 per cent of them – mention weather. The Beatles also mentioned the elements in 16 per cent of their songs. Well, well, well. Who knew? Thinking about it in the car, the reason quickly became fairly clear: these references are often metaphors for matters of the heart. Love and weather seemingly go hand in hand: they always say summer time is the time you make up or break up – things feel fresher, more exciting with a ray of sunshine and a major key. On the other hand, some deep cello on a grey day will only emphasise your heartache and longing.

Whatever the reason, it's a great bridge into a song – we are all one after all. Except for David Bowie: he took us into another orbit too. RIP beautiful Star Man.

■ *Listen to The Sunday Night Music Club from 8pm every week on Absolute Radio.*

FURTHER LISTENING...

'80s STORIES: DAVID BOWIE LET'S DANCE
Absolute 80s, 31 January, 9-10pm
Documentary about Bowie's 1983 album Let's Dance, his biggest seller, which he co-produced with Chic's Nile Rodgers.

SUEDE: NIGHT THOUGHTS LIVE
Absolute Radio 90s, 31 January, 10-11pm
Featuring live tracks recorded especially for the show, including songs from the Londoners' excellent new album, Night Thoughts. Plus Brett Anderson talks to host Sarah Champion.

Suede: sharing their Night Thoughts.

NUMBER 2s DAY ON ABSOLUTE 80s
Absolute 80s, 2 February, 10am-8pm
To celebrate the second day of the second month, Absolute 80s is littering its playlist with the biggest and best Number 2 singles of the 1980s.

ROCK ICONS: BRYAN ADAMS
Absolute Radio 90s, 14 February, 10-11pm
Bryan Adams talks in depth to Sarah Champion about his career, including, on Valentine's Day, the story behind his record-breaking love song (Everything I Do) I Do It For You and how the film company behind Robin Hood: Prince Of Thieves initially had their doubts about it.

PHOTOSHOT

CASH FOR QUESTIONS

Interrogate the stars. You could win £25!

WEST LONDON INDIE TITANS The Vaccines DISCUSS RUDE CELEBRITIES, SIBLING RIVALRY AND ONE DIRECTION.

WORDS PAUL STOKES **PHOTOGRAPHS** PEROU

Picking remnants of fried egg out of their hair and examining the smears of brown sauce and ketchup they've sprayed over one another, The Vaccines look like a full-English fry-up as served by Jackson Pollock following a particularly vigorous food fight in the basement of West London's Troubadour Club. All, that is, apart from lead singer Justin Young who, bar a few specks of baked bean juice, is sporting the sort of remarkably clean all-white outfit that could land him a role in a washing powder advert.

"See that?" asks Young as he shows off his food-free garments. "That is respect!" He grins as his bandmates – guitarist Freddie Cowan, drummer Pete Robertson and bassist Árni Árnason – burst into laughter.

It's not the first time Young has been here. With its tiny corner stage, the Troubadour's basement has served as a crucible for many new London acts. "I've seen Mumford & Sons on that stage," recalls Young. "Loads of people played here."

Jay Jay Pistolet, the name of Young's pre-Vaccines singer-songwriter project, was among them too, although he admits pickings were slim.

"I played here maybe 10 times. Saw many faces... actually not many faces. There are more people here now than when I played it," he notes, looking at the handful of people present. "I've never seen it so packed out!"

(Above) dazzling onstage at Cambridge Corn Exchange, November 2015; (below) singer Justin Young's wedding wear.

Thankfully, those days are behind him. Three Top 5 albums under his belt and his songwriting skills in demand by other artists including One Direction, the days of disrespect for Justin Young are over... well, almost.

What's the best piece of online abuse that you've received?
James Bellingham, via Q Mail

Justin Young: I've had a couple of personal attacks. Normally, I don't look but recently we did a Radio 1 Live Lounge *[covering OMI's Cheerleader]* that's had more dislikes than likes on YouTube. I'm quite disciplined, I won't read comments now but I saw that and thought, "Wow, people really didn't like it!" There was also one comment saying I had a fat greasy head, too!

Freddie Cowan: Didn't they call you a potato face?

Justin, one of my daughters is planning on marrying you. In order for me to plan ahead, please advise whether you'd prefer register office or church and what's the dress code?
Rick Clegg, Preston

JY: It will be register office. It will be Hawaiian shirt vibes for the guests but I'll be in an all-white tux, *à la* David Beckham. My biggest pet hate at weddings is when my friends have got dressed up but leave their trainers on. I don't like it! "Does anyone know a reason why these two cannot wed?" Yeah! You look like a twat! *[laughs]*

Are you worried about bacteria's growing resistance to antibiotics?
Michael Jenner, Cardiff

All simultaneously: Yes!

Pete Robertson: Extremely worried!

FC: It's probably the most serious thing we face. It's going to be the next wipe out.

What's the funniest piece of English Graffiti you've seen?
Ryan Deakinin, Gloucester

JY: There's one in Paris you can see when you go up to the look-out at Montmartre, it just says "Internet" *[laughs]*. It was probably done in 1992 when that was a really sick tag to use.

REX, ALAMY

All in white (sort of): The Vaccines (from left, Justin Young, Freddie Cowan, Pete Robertson and Árni Árnason), The Troubadour, West London, 11 December, 2015.

Justin, what do you make of your namesake Justin Bieber's recent trouble and apparent reinvention?
Christian Curtis, St Helier
JY: I'm very proud of him. Because we share the same name I feel a responsibility towards him. I really loved the Jack Ü song *[Where Are Ü Now]* with Skrillex and Diplo he did. I'm not so keen on the last couple of singles, but as a personality I think he's incredible.

Freddie, how competitive are you with your brother, Tom Cowan of The Horrors? Are family get-togethers feisty affairs?
Ben Whitley, via Q Mail
FC: Not competitive at all.
JY: That's not true, you told me about a particularly feisty get-together only the other day.
FC: Well, we're feisty in the way brothers are, but not about our bands.
JY: He's lying! They get very feisty.

Going back to his roots: Young in his "quite twee" Jay Jay Pistolet guise, 2008.

What have you drunkenly bid for on eBay?
Joe Milton, via Q Mail
Árni Árnason: Most recently I bought three copies of *[wooden board game]* Shut The Box.
JY: One for every room in the house?
PR: A great many things! Mainly really crappy, old music equipment. Real crap. Your competitive side comes out and you pay more for rubbish.
JY: I got banned from eBay a few years ago and I haven't got round to going back on. I wasn't paying my seller's fees. I was selling trainers and stuff.

Who's the rudest celebrity you've ever met?
David Langley, Hook
PR: Who was that crazy Finnish metal dude?
JY: Michael Monroe!
PR: He was brilliant. He did not enjoy our summer games. If you're playing a metal festival in Finland, then the singer of Hanoi Rocks is a celebrity and he was very upset with us.
FC: Pete hit him with a Frisbee.
PR: We were horsing around quite drunkenly and he had to stand up and say, "What the fuck, bro!" a few times.

Is being in The Vaccines everything you expected?
Harriet Spinter, Shoreham
JY: It depends what time of day it is.
FC: It gets better as the day goes on.
JY: By midnight, it's really awesome.

If Jay Jay Pistolet had become the Ed Sheeran of his day, what would the rest of you be doing now?
Penny Ross, via Q Mail

REX, ALAMY

Another fine mess: The Vaccines field your queries without the use of napkins (note spotless frontman).

"I'M VERY PROUD OF JUSTIN BIEBER. BECAUSE WE SHARE A NAME I FEEL A RESPONSIBILITY TOWARDS HIM." JUSTIN YOUNG

PR: Does Justin get to decide? *[all laugh]*

JY: Yes! I've always thought of Árni as a very good driver, so you can be my driver. Freddie can be my guitar tech, Pete does a good spaghetti bolognese, so he's my chef. What was really interesting for me is that I've always maintained the songwriting at the heart of The Vaccines is pretty much identical to what I was doing when I was on my own. Although I have looked back at the way I dressed up, it was quite twee, and I realised that was pretty embarrassing. It's interesting how important the context of music is. There's not a lot that separates that from this in a songwriting sense.

AA: I remember you were burning Jay Jay Pistolet CDs and flogging them for a tenner during the first practice we had in your house.

JY: No! *[pauses]* It was probably cheaper than a tenner.

FC: I saw him play the shortest ever gig I've seen in my life.

JY: I only ever played three or four songs because I used to think: "People don't know my music, why would they want to hear more than that?"

FC: Particularly when one will do!

How do you all feel about fan tattoos?
Snotlout Jorgenson, via Twitter

FC: It's fine when they get the lyrics right, but I have to say I've only seen wrong ones.

AA: The worst I saw was a couple who'd had the All In White lyrics tattooed on them. They told us it was the song they'd met to, but we'd only released it a month before.

JY: It's flattering and you have to trust in people to make the decision wisely, but I do feel a bit of responsibility because a lot of people who do this are teenagers and I know what I wanted to wear and have tattooed when I was 17, 18. I do feel quite guilty. It would be awesome if we're your Smiths and you're going to love us forever... but we might be your *[pop punk act]* Sum 41!

Do you think the public school system in the UK is fair?
Kelli Olson, via Q Mail

JY: It depends what you mean by "fair". The parents of people who attend them are paying for them to go, so it's very far along the chain in terms of fair, isn't it? Is it fair that some people's parents have enough money to send them to private school? I don't know. It's a different question, but possibly the key one. Two of us did go and two of us didn't and we all have different opinions on the matter. I won't send my kids to one. Why have a kid if you're just going to send them to a private boarding school?

Famous friends and enemies: (above left) Hanoi Rocks frontman and The Vaccines' Frisbee bête noire, Michael Monroe; (above right) Justin Young's songwriting collaborator, 1D's Niall Horan; (below) lippy, as advertised by the boys.

Rimmel used If You Wanna in an ad. If The Vaccines had a lipstick, what would you call the shade?
Ruth Kelly @iamruthkelly, via Twitter

AA: We were actually in the ad *[with Kate Moss]* as well.

JY: We'll do anything for money. School fees *these days*! *[all laugh]*

PR: So it will be green, with dollar signs!

JY: The funny thing is that we're in that ad too and no one noticed! No one ever found out.

Justin, are you still in contact with Niall from One Direction? I need to know!
s(ad), via Twitter

JY: I'm not going to justify that question with an answer *[laughs]*. I've done bits and pieces of songwriting with other people and I do really enjoy it *[Young collaborated with Horan and bandmate Harry Styles on material]*. The more you learn to write from the head the more it improves your ability to write from the heart. Whenever you write a song you're running your engine. I've never had a day when I've written a song with someone and I didn't enjoy it.

Do you have any hobbies?
Faye Davidson, via Q Mail

JY: Freddie makes Airfix models. I ride motorbikes, is that a hobby? Er, I love snow skiing. As opposed to all the other skiings... Actually, when I first met Freddie he told me he didn't like football, so I asked him if he liked any sports and he said: "I'm really good at water-skiing." That's not a sport!

FC: I stand by that.

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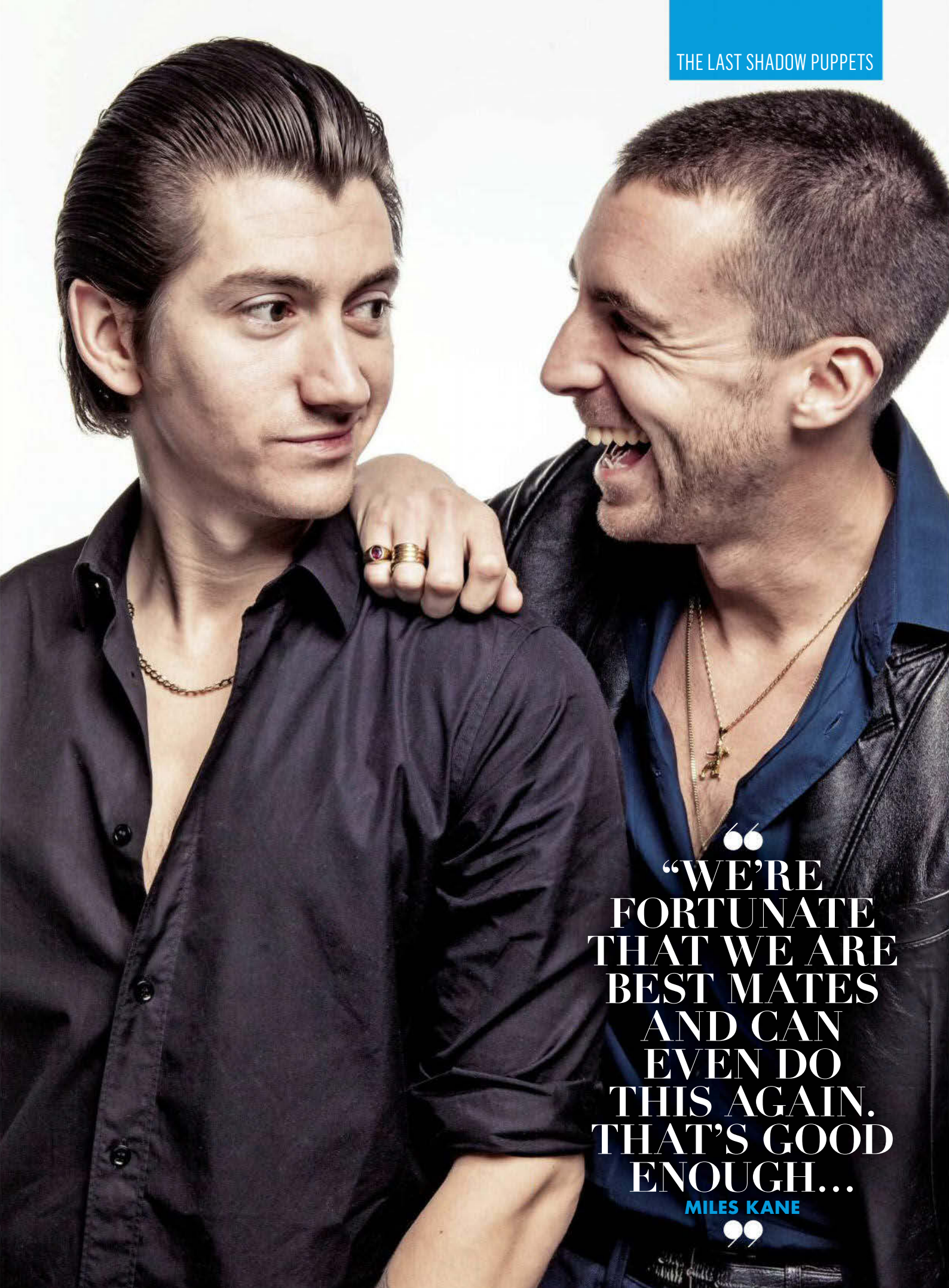
TRUE BROMANCE

Eight years ago, inspired by the retro record collection of his new best mate Miles Kane, Arctic Monkeys' Alex Turner co-created the sweeping orchestral pop of The Last Shadow Puppets. It would prove to be the start of one of pop's most enduring love affairs. "Would it be a better story if we'd been estranged?" the pair ask Chris Catchpole as they finally return with a follow-up.

PHOTOGRAPHS
ALEX LAKE



“WE’RE FORTUNATE THAT WE ARE BEST MATES AND CAN EVEN DO THIS AGAIN. THAT’S GOOD ENOUGH…”

MILES KANE

3 NOVEMBER, 2008, THE MAYAN THEATRE, LA.

Backed by a 16-piece orchestra and dressed in matching outfits of black ties, three-button suits and Chelsea boots that made them look like a cartoonist's approximation of mid-'60s Beatles, The Last Shadow Puppets brought "the last song of our last gig" to a triumphant and emotional close. Later that evening the pair celebrated the end of the tour before saying their goodbyes. The next morning it was back to the day jobs.

For Alex Turner, that would soon involve growing his hair out and venturing into the desert with Queens Of The Stone Age frontman Josh Homme to craft Arctic Monkeys' gnarly third album, Humbug. For Miles Kane, largely unknown 18 months previously, it meant stepping out of the spotlight afforded by his collaboration with the Arctic Monkey's leader and trying to forge his way as a frontman in his own right.

"There was definitely a tear in the car going to the airport," recalls Kane today, as he and Turner settle down for lunch in London a few days before Christmas. "Without getting too... you know."

"We exchanged sentiments from the 'we have to do this again' paradigm with conviction," expands Turner somewhat floridly. "But we knew the promises we were making might be too juicy to keep."

The break-up would, however, prove to be short-lived. Within a year, they were back writing songs together for Kane's debut solo LP (2011's Colour Of The Trap). A few months after that, they returned to the stage in LA for a short acoustic set at a benefit for cancer-stricken Eagles Of Death Metal bassist Brian O'Connor. As a matter of fact, over the next few years Turner and Kane appeared to spend as much time together as the practicalities of international touring schedules would allow. Getting photographed horsing around at a string of parties, fashion shows and concerts across the globe, frequently popping up to perform at one another's gigs (Arctic Monkeys fans would probably feel short-changed if Miles Kane *didn't* join the band onstage to play guitar on second album stand-out 505) and most recently moving

"Rain? And only one umbrella? Mwah ha ha!" Alex Turner (left) and Miles Kane, Park Village East, London, 21 December 2015.

> "HOW DO WE WRITE? TONGUE TO EAR."
> **ALEX TURNER**

around the corner from each other in the Hollywood Hills where Turner gives Kane rides through town on the back of his motorbike. The friendship they forged while making the sweeping '60s-indebted sounds of their debut album, The Age Of The Understatement, has proved to be indie rock's most enduring bromance. They even have their own portmanteau celebrity couple name among fans, "Milex".

"Would it be a better story if we'd been estranged?" jokes Turner. "That we fell out and didn't see each other until the summer?"

Eight years after The Age Of The Understatement's release, Alex Turner and Miles Kane are finally back together for professional, Last Shadow Puppets-related purposes as they get ready to release the follow-up, Everything You've Come To Expect. In place of 2008's bashfully giggling 21-year-old moptops, though, sit a pair of coolly confident transatlantic rock stars. Dressed in stonewashed double-denim and still sporting an impressively coiffered quiff, Turner boasts the sort of stocky shoulders that suggest a gym membership is being well-used. Kane, meanwhile, has shaved his head and is wearing his shirt half-unbuttoned to reveal a selection of gold medallions and all-over tan that indicates, two albums into his solo career, life on the US West Coast is suiting the Wirral native just fine. The giggling, however, remains intact.

"We'd always hoped to do it again but if we were to compose a sequel it was certain not to be for a long time. We had other things we wanted to do," notes Turner sweeping his hair back with his hands and blinking back jet-lag, having flown in from LA with his model girlfriend Taylor Bagley three nights previously. "We'd be doing press for the other shit we were doing and we'd always get the question, 'Are you going to do another Puppets thing?' So one time Miles says, 'No, but we're working on this movie together, it's like an X-Men hero-style flick but set in the '60s...' Then a month later this journalist in, like, fucking Brussels goes to me, 'So I heard about this movie that you're making with Miles...' I was like, 'Fuck it, let's just run with this', and added a bit to the story."

To their amusement, news stories around the world reported it as fact and it would repeatedly be brought up in subsequent Arctic Monkeys and Miles Kane interviews for their incremental embellishment. "I'd forgotten about it, then in LA this paparazzo at the airport goes to me, 'So I hear you're doing this superhero movie...' adds Turner. "'Fuck, it's still hanging around! Maybe we should just actually make the movie.'"

At this point, our waiter arrives to deliver their food. A club sandwich for Kane and – at Kane's suggestion – a chicken-and-ham pie for Turner ("I had it last week, I knew he'd love it"). After placing the plates on the table the waiter lingers by the door.

"It's an honour, sir," he says to Turner who graciously thanks him and says, "Nice to meet you, what's your name?" Stratos, from Greece, is the reply.

"Eyyyyyy, you behave yourself, Stratos!" chips in Kane, who, judging by the wide-eyed grin on his face, cannot believe his luck at this unexpected piece of embarrassment for his friend.

"The first two records are just the best," continues Stratos. "The third one, I was expecting it so badly and then... Urrrrrrrrgh. No words. Anyway," he perks up, "enjoy it, guys!"

Kane is paralysed by silent hysterics.

"He's got a point," shrugs Turner.

Given when their first album was released Turner had only just moved into his own flat in London, while Kane still lived with his mum, Everything You've Come To Expect is a suitably more grown-up record than its predecessor. If The Age Of The Understatement was a galloping swoop of lush, orchestral pop that wore its retro influences (The Beatles, early Bowie, composers David Axelrod and John Barry, *lots* of Scott Walker) proudly on its sleeve, the second Last Shadow Puppets album is altogether slinkier, sexier and darker. The whole thing seems to come at you through a haze of neon light and cigarette smoke. Opulent strings that bring to mind soul Lotharios, Isaac Hayes and Barry White weave themselves around almost disco-like grooves and '70s rock loucheness. Throw in references to processions of "glum looking beauties", "enthusiasm paraphernalia" and "comedown tapping at the glass" and it's hard from an outside perspective to not think of these two famous, super model-squiring young men running around Los Angeles getting up to no good. They called spikily dissonant lead single Bad Habits after all.

"It wasn't like we wrote about going out in Hollywood," protests Turner. "I dunno, man, it's really not like that. It makes me, I mean... when I listen to the record, I think of Paris as much as I think of LA, you know. We wrote a bit there..."

As a way of spending his time, being interviewed appears for Alex Turner to rank somewhere below going through airport security and marginally above undergoing root canal surgery. Even the most straightforward of questions – "When did you start work on the record?" for instance – can lead him to clasp his hands to his face and groan as if he had been presented with a sheet of particularly challenging long division to be cracking on with. You don't get the sense that he's being difficult exactly – "I'm efficiently vague, sufficiently obtuse," is how he puts it – it's more that, ironically, the most eloquent lyricist of his generation finds the process of discussing his words, his work and himself rubs against the very grain of his »

MASTERS OF PUPPETS:

The inspirations behind new album Everything You've Come To Expect.

ISAAC HAYES
Hot Buttered Soul

Alex Turner: "We had references for the strings. *[This]* was one of them. What's good about Owen *[Pallett, strings arranger]* is that he doesn't do that really because he's an artist. With a lot of people, you'd mention those references and they'd just emulate that."

SERGE GAINSBOURG
Histoire de Melody Nelson

AT: "I always just keep trying to make everything sound like ...Melodie Nelson and getting nowhere near."
Miles Kane: "The bass is getting close."
AT: "I heard that the other day. I was like, 'Shit, got a bit near it. Maybe.'"

DR HOOK
When You're In Love With A Beautiful Woman

MK: "I'm having a right Dr Hook vibe at the minute. I haven't got the eye-patch yet though. There were bits of that. You know, those kinds of songs that we wouldn't have been into back then *[during the making of The Age Of The Understatement]*. A bit cheesy but still cool."

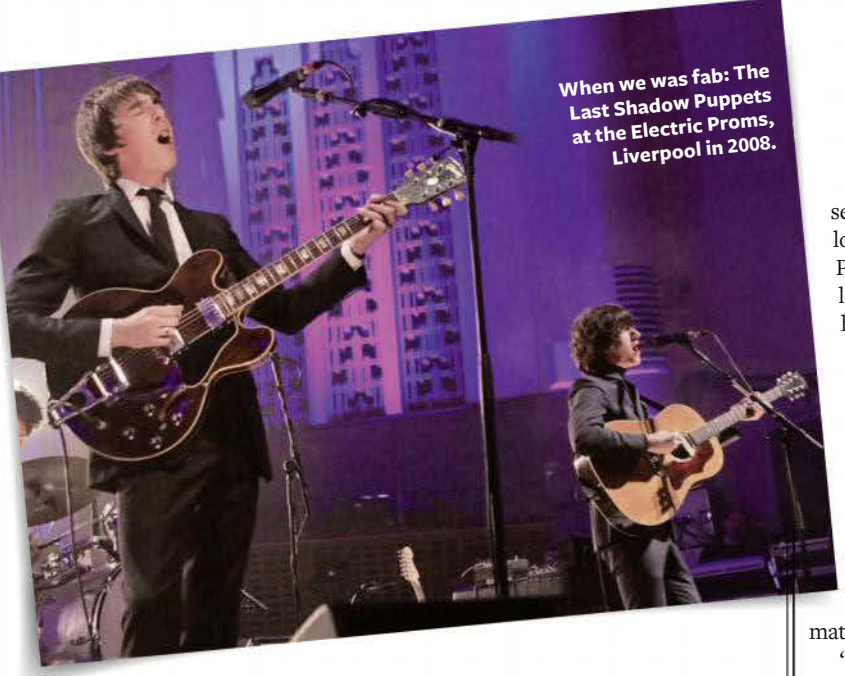
NED DOHENY
Get It Up For Love

MK: "There were certain things that you *[Alex]* were buzzing off, like *[soft-rock artist]* Ned Doheny. What was the name of that song?"
AT: "Get It Up For Love, stuff like that. It has a soft-edged quality that is almost sickly. This is something I became increasingly attracted to as time has passed."

THE STYLE COUNCIL
Long Hot Summer

AT: "There's a shimmering quality to it. I never used to get The Style Council. I loved The Jam, but The Style Council never meant any sense to me. It's interesting that we say that song? Why, because the album sounds fuck-all like it?"

UMBRELLA FROM JAMES SMITH & SONS, NEW OXFORD STREET, LONDON WC1



When we was fab: The Last Shadow Puppets at the Electric Proms, Liverpool in 2008.

being. Sometimes he'll answer a question simply with a "Yeah" punctuated by pause large enough to park an Eddie Stobart lorry in.

"I don't even hear what the words are any more, sadly," Turner offers after much brow-furrowing. "It's like, there's that many items that it's just another... *[Long pause]* Yeah."

There's a Sheffield rose tattoo on the singer's inside forearm to remind the LA resident where he's from. His devout Yorkshire stoicism would surely suffice.

There is plenty within Everything You've Come To Expect for anyone curious about the lives of Turner and Kane, though. Beneath its outward glitz lies the nagging sense of regret and loneliness that so often accompanies long-term partying. The title track's woozy psychedelic waltz throws up a phantasmagoria of surreal visions of decadence, all fever-dream flashes of "a croc-skinned collar on a diamond dog", "dirt-bag valet by the bins down the alley" and "hotel room free-love revival". There's Used To Be My Girl's quasi-comic self-loathing – "I'm a liar and a cheat, a leech, a thief, the outside looks no good and there ain't nothing underneath" – while on Pattern's the-morning-after-several-nights-in-a-row-before lament Kane ruefully wonders why "never in my wildest dreams has it occurred to me to go to sleep".

Debauchery aside, for much of the album Turner seems to be suffering chiefly from either old-fashioned heartbreak or lovesickness. It certainly appears to be the latter on Sweet Dreams, a showstopping, Elvis-in-Vegas turn ("tired and sweaty?" he retorts with a chuckle) in which a barnstorming career-best vocal delivers a not particularly opaque message that, "It's really just the pits without you, baby/It's like everyone's a dick without you, baby... am I falling in love?" Given Turner split from actress Arielle Vandenberg in 2014 and started dating Bagley in the months before recording started, autobiographical source material isn't too hard to uncover.

"*That* tune actually is perhaps the only one where I sat down and it is just what it is," concedes Turner by way of explanation. "That's straightforward that."

Does he ever worry when writing a song that people might rake over his lyrics for clues about his personal life?

"Rake away! I hope I've hidden them deep enough that you may catch the occasional gateway to a deepened perception of experience along the way rather than just acquiring knowledge about what makes me tick."

While they may seem like they've been friends since they were both in short trousers, Turner and Kane first met in 2005 when The Little Flames, the freakbeat-inspired band Kane had joined as a guitarist aged 18, opened for Arctic Monkeys. Though they

"MILEX" MOMENTS

Miles and Alex – livin' la vida loca...

(From left) At a Paris fashion show, 2014; Alex with Arielle Vandenburg, 2012; by the pool in 2008; Alex reunites with Miles at Glastonbury, 2013.

(From left) Alex with Taylor Bagley, 2015; Miles with TV presenter Laura Whitmore, 2013; at a Halloween party, 2015; Miles with ex-partner Agyness Deyn in 2009.

BBC PICTURES, GETTY, FLYNET

"Double denim – it's the way forward, man..." Kane and Turner, Park Village Studios, London.

> "MILES LED ME CREATIVELY DOWN DIFFERENT PATHS..."
> **ALEX TURNER**

didn't massively hit it off at first ("I was probably quite stoned and cold," recalls Kane with a laugh), the friendship quickly snowballed over subsequent dates and tours. The Age Of The Understatement was born out of '60s nut Kane turning new best mate Turner onto his record collection, but even before that they had collaborated on Favourite Worst Nightmare's 505 and a clutch of Monkeys B-sides. Seeing as Nick O'Malley had recently joined the fold after the departure of original bassist Andy Nicholson, was there ever the notion of Kane just joining Arctic Monkeys?

Turner thinks about the question for a minute. "Well... no. I think because that was when you'd just started *[short-lived Kane-fronted trio]* The Rascals. That was just all happening as well..."

"I *really* wanted to be a frontman at that time," interrupts Kane. "I hadn't been a frontman. I had a hard-on for that."

Turner: "Still have."

"We're fortunate that we are best mates and that we can even do this again and that's good enough, I guess," says Kane diplomatically. "I don't want to say in an ideal world we would be in a band *[together]* because we both love what we do aside from this..."

OK, then, put it another way. If by some twist of geographical fate they'd ended up in the same school – the pair are only two months apart in age – would this be what they do full time?

Turner: "Yeah."

Kane: "If I'd moved to Sheffield? Imagine me! *[Yorkshire accent]* 'Y'alright, there? D'ya like the new record, or what?' Heheheh. Fucking yeah, probably."

Turner: "This or Strictly."

The two certainly have chemistry. They finish each other's sentences, frequently say the exact same thing at the exact same time and routinely break into comedy voices for their own amusement. Owen Pallett, the violinist and Arcade Fire associate who arranged the string parts for both albums, quite accurately describes working with the duo as "like watching a buddy-cop movie". Q brings up an old interview where they describe their writing process as sitting with acoustic guitars "knee to knee" and they break into whooping hysterics.

"Did we say knee to knee?!? Wow," marvels Kane.

How do they write now?

[Together]: "Shoulder to shoulder."

Turner: "Cheek to cheek."

»

> “PAUL WELLER SAID TO ME HIS 30s WAS THE BEST TIME OF HIS LIFE. SO, YEAH, BRING THEM ON. I’M GOING TO BE SHAGGING!”
>
> **MILES KANE**

The two of us: Turner and Kane, upstairs at Park Village Studios.

Kane: “Chin to chin.”

Turner: “Tongue to ear.”

Recently they’ve been re-watching the Beatles Anthology TV series for entertainment and will simultaneously drop into note-perfect Ringo Starr impersonations at the drop of a hat – “*I* never played with Elvis, *John* might have played with Elvis!” In fact, their intertwined wit and irreverence bring to mind another songwriting duo with Liverpool connections. When working on Nowhere Boy, her biopic of John Lennon’s early life, artist-turned-director Sam Taylor-Wood saw an interview with Turner and Kane and, struck by their Beatles-like rapport, went to see a Last Shadow Puppets show.

“Somebody said, ‘Here’s Sam Taylor-Wood, she wants to say hello,’” recalls Kane. “We thought it would be for a cameo or something but she gave us the script and we were like, ‘What?!?’ I thought she wanted me to play McCartney, so I thought, ‘Oh maybe I could do McCartney...’ But it was Lennon, like the main fucking thing. We did think about it but then I didn’t. Well, obviously I didn’t.”

Didn’t she want them both in the film?

“Maybe she thought that but turned up and realised that I had zero personality,” deadpans Turner. “I love the idea that there is a parallel universe somewhere where Miles accepted the Nowhere Boy role.”

“I could have been in *[action film starring Taylor-Wood’s eventual choice for Nowhere Boy and future husband Aaron Johnson]* Kick-Ass, do you know what I mean?” wonders Kane. “I’d be having a baby with her as well, wouldn’t I?”

It’s not hard to see why Alex Turner likes to spend so much time with Miles Kane. In contrast to Turner’s laid-back manner and laconic wit, he’s a hyperactive jolt of good vibes and manic, schoolboy humour. If he had a “hard-on” for being a frontman before The Last Shadow Puppets, Kane has grabbed the opportunity Turner’s patronage presented him with both hands. So to speak.

Dating a string of models and TV presenters offstage, onstage Kane is a natural-born showman. Engaging in call and responses with the crowd, running around, wiggling his arse and developing a penchant

"WE WOULD GO OUT AND SING KARAOKE..."

The Last Shadow Puppets' string arranger OWEN PALLETT on working with "Milex".

"It came as a bit of a surprise last summer when I got the call. I thought that if another album was going to happen they'd forgotten about me *[laughs]*. The original plan was that I was to go to Malibu for two days, listen to their work and then go away and work on that stuff independent of them, but on the first day Rick Rubin said stay as long as you want. So I slept on the coach, spooning a French bulldog, worked eight hours a day at the piano and went swimming every day. I asked them, 'So, what kind of stuff are you looking for on this record?' and they said, 'Well, have you heard The Age Of The Understatement?' There was a very different list of reference points this time. When we were working on that first record they were like 20 or 21 and now they're completely different people. Miles is an adult, you know what I mean? You look at photos of him from that first record and he looks like a child and now he looks like this LA kind of huckster character. In the evenings we would go out and sing karaoke at the next town over. Sometimes they would do Last Shadow Puppets songs, which was them taking the piss more than anything. There were more than a few nights where I woke up with a hangover. The first day that I arrived they'd had a crazy party the night before. I remember wondering where everyone was because nobody showed up to work till 2pm. The whole experience was really social. Miles and Alex were kind of in their own world, but it never felt alienating or isolating. It was like watching a really good buddy-cop film."

Surf's up: Miles Kane in Malibu.

for leopard print and red leather that recalls Rod Stewart in his '70s pomp. He and Turner even showed up to a Paris fashion show two years ago in matching leather trousers.

"Rod Stewart was going to give me his red leather suit once," notes Kane on the subject. "I'd heard he was a bit of a tight arse. I met him on Alan Carr and I had this record with him in a red leather suit on the front *[1983's Body Wishes]*. He said, 'Oh, I've still got that suit, I'll give it ya.' His PA came out, got me details and got me hopes up. A few months went by and they were like, 'Oh no, he couldn't find it.' So then I thought, 'Oh, he is a fucking tight arse.' I did bump into him again in LA and asked him about it and he was like '*[Vague]* Oh yeahhhh, they couldn't find it.' I think I had to buy him a drink as well!"

Outside of music and leather trousers, Kane's chief love is professional wrestling ("I'm a *massive* wrestling fan, wrestling's my inspiration and that ain't a joke"). Last Halloween, while Turner dressed up as Batman villain The Riddler, Kane went for flamboyant '90s WWF star Ric Flair. "Ric Flair and The Riddler, it pretty accurately sums us up," notes Turner dryly. Such is Kane's passion that one of the teaser trailers for the new album features him excitedly reciting one of Flair's hype speeches to the camera interspersed with clips of the duo, Pallett, producer James Ford and bassist Zak Dawes recording in Rick Rubin's Malibu studio.

Offering a bit of tranquillity compared to LA, the album was recorded there in just three weeks last autumn with records including Isaac Hayes's Hot Buttered Soul, Serge Gainsbourg's Histoire de Melody Nelson and – somewhat unexpectedly – The Style Council's Long Hot Summer replacing the likes of Scott Walker as reference points. Days would be spent writing, recording or swimming in the sea while at night they would venture out to the nearby karaoke bar (Missy Elliott's Get Ur Freak On being a favourite of Kane's) or to the "no vibe" sports bar just up the road.

"They were 'keeping music live' one night and we strolled in," recalls Turner. "There was some fella playing Sweet Child O' Mine, shit like that, and by the end of the night we got on there and did Bad Habits."

"Everyone was like, 'Who the *fuck* are these guys?" says Kane, laughing.

Back in the UK momentarily to visit their families over Christmas, right now the two of them are trying to work out the logistics of taking the new album on the road. It's less how to recreate Pallett's intricate string parts and more how to fit Kane's show-off antics on the same stage as the Elvis-meets-Nick Cave-by-way-of-a-Northern-cabaret-host persona Turner unveiled at Glastonbury in 2014.

"We're going to be squabbling over the mic this time," jokes Turner. "*[Mimics Kane's accent]* You can't wear that, what are you doing?!?"

By Kane's own admission Turner has, and probably always will have, a profile and level of acclaim that's in a different division to the Merseysider's. It's by no means just Kane who has benefited from their collaboration, though. If you retrospectively look at Alex Turner's recorded output it's clear that The Age Of The Understatement marked the point where he – much to the disconcertion of our friend Stratos – broke free from the rapid-fire social observations and spiky indie-rock that catapulted him to fame as a teenager. Having the freedom to experiment with Kane on different sounds and trying new ways of crafting melodies and lyrics would lead him to consider any avenue fair game from then on in, be it Humbug's psych weirdness, the delicate balladry of his score for 2010 film Submarine, Suck It And See's surrealist sunshine pop or the all-conquering, future-rock come-on of 2013's AM.

"Totally," asserts Turner. "The first step of that was definitely this thing. No doubt. I was led by him creatively down paths I suspected would arrive at different places than the ones I'd wandered in the past. I think in the beginning it was a lot to do with the allure of making a record we weren't supposed to make."

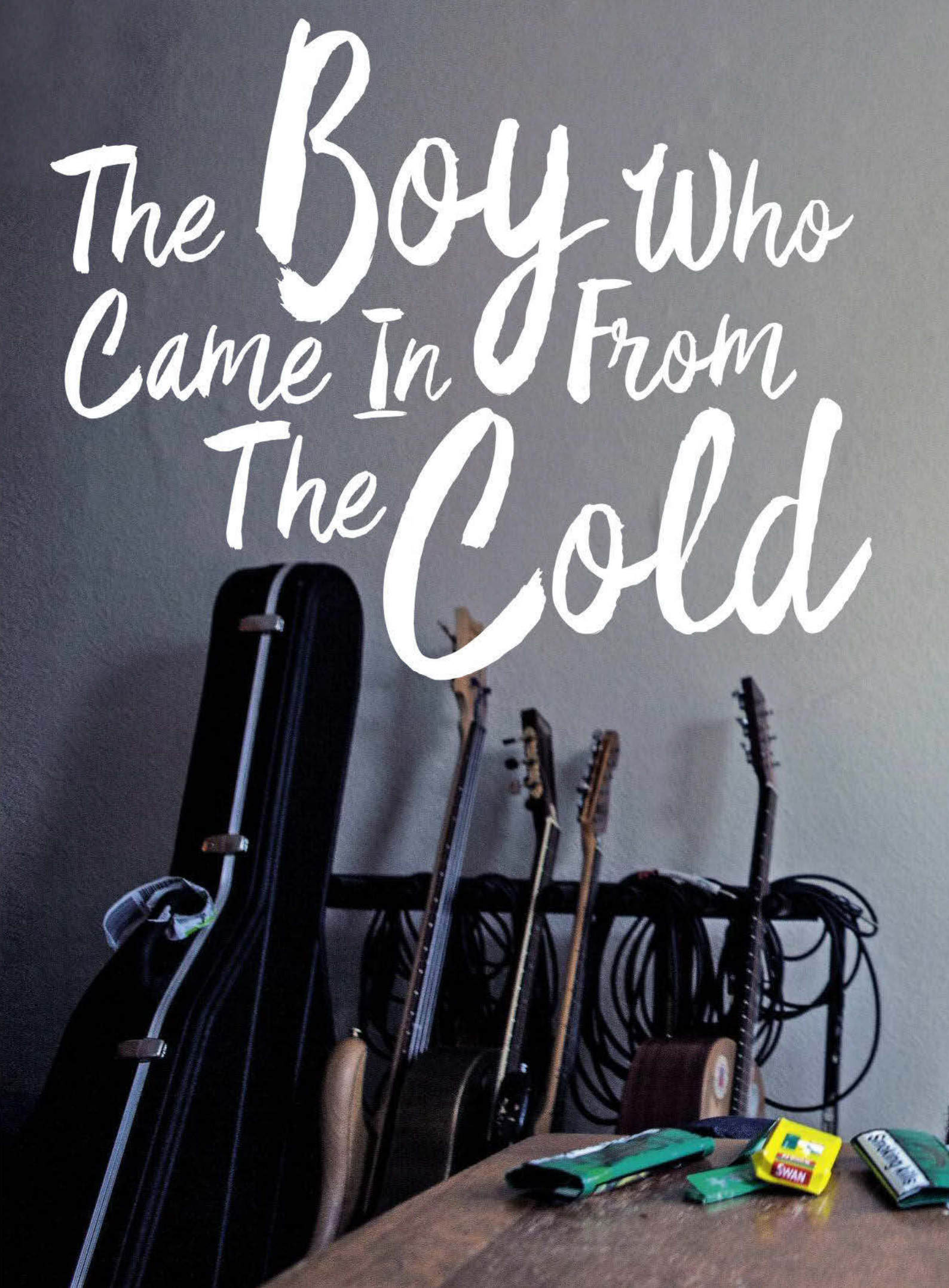
In just a few weeks they will both be turning 30. Q asks if they have anything special planned, to which they both start singing in a Shirley Bassey-style voice.

"I'llll sit at the barrrr, I'llll drink me some rum and I'll say, 'Boyyyy, what are you doing to my womaaaaaan!!!'"

Kane momentarily returns to his normal speaking voice. "Paul Weller said to me his 30s was the best time of his life. So, yeah, bring them on. I can't wait *[jumps to his feet and starts vigorously thrusting his hips in front of Turner]* I'm going to be shagging! Shagging, lad! Shagging this and shagging that! Shagging the teacups! I'm gonna shag that tree later!"

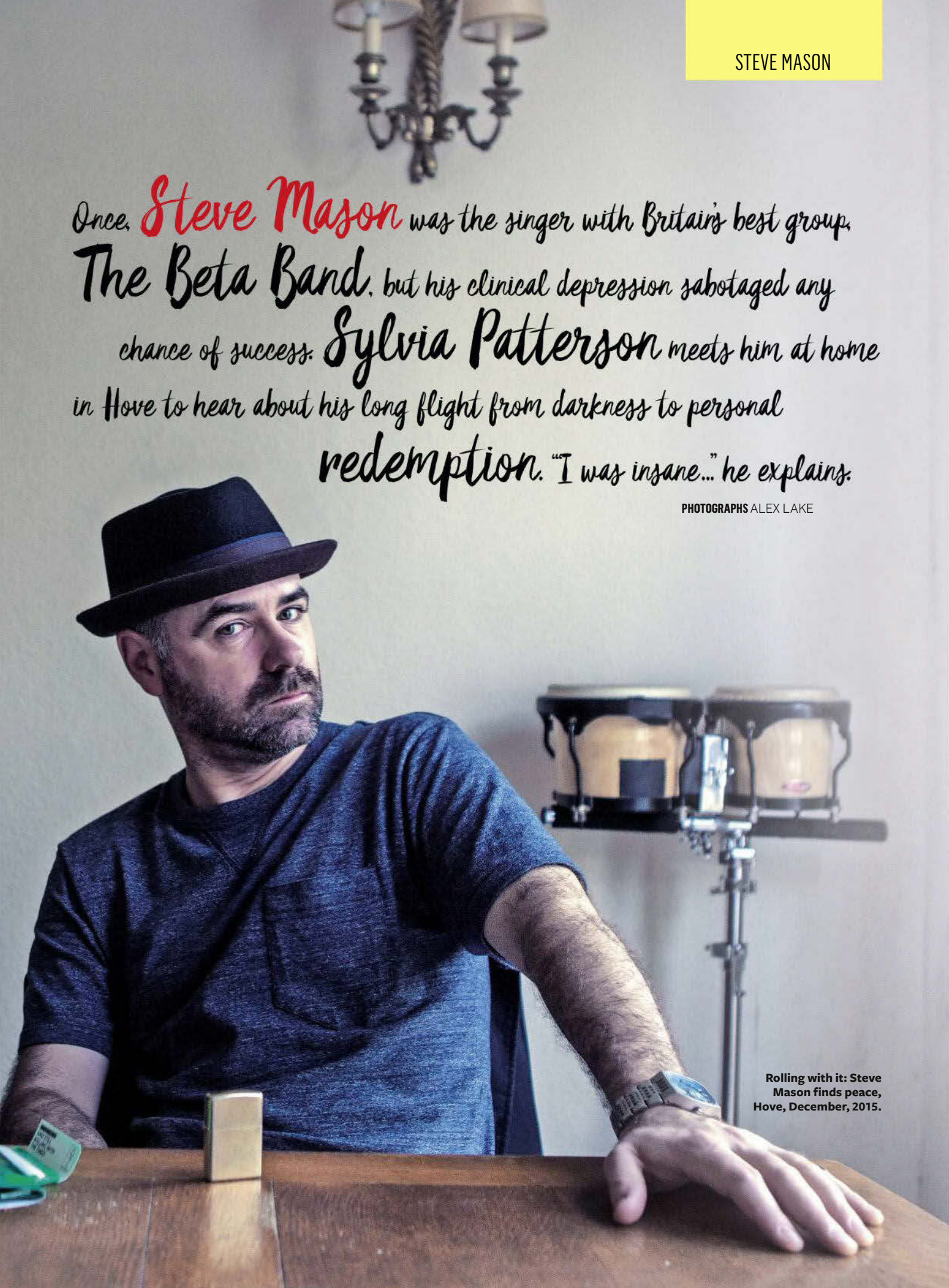
Let's leave them to it. Giggling, conspiring and lost in their own little world where their chief objective seems to be to entertain each other. Who says that bromance is dead? Q

The Boy Who Came In From The Cold



Once, **Steve Mason** was the singer with Britain's best group, **The Beta Band**, but his clinical depression sabotaged any chance of success. **Sylvia Patterson** meets him at home in Hove to hear about his long flight from darkness to personal **redemption**. "I was insane..." he explains.

PHOTOGRAPHS ALEX LAKE



Rolling with it: Steve Mason finds peace, Hove, December, 2015.

Summer 1999: The Beta Band are the best new band in Britain. The previous year's The Three EP's had been a stunning collection of grooved-up psych-pop folk-art, a sonic pulsar of hypnotic light in the dead space of the burned-out Britpop supernova. Anticipation is immense, then, for their eponymous debut album. Inside a pub in central London, Steve Mason, 26, lead singer/main songwriter, from the East Coast of Scotland, could best be described as thistle-faced. Their debut album is, he announces, "fucking awful". Furthermore, it's "completely irrelevant", full of "half-written demos". Soon, he's charging down the street, as I charge after him, imploring him to say something positive about this unique and glorious concept band we're supposed to be celebrating on the cover of a magazine. "Believe in someone else!" he thunders, and disappears into a cab. (Five chaotic years later The Beta Band were £1.2m in debt to EMI and split up.)

Late December 2015 and Steve Mason's stubbly face is creased in cackling laughter.

"Believe in someone else!" he roars, now a 42-year-old man of engaging self-assurance, seated at a tiny dining table in a rented, red-bricked terraced house in coastal Hove, by Brighton. "I was talking about that interview last night," he smiles, hand-rolling Golden Virginia. "It's probably the greatest example of a self-destructive musician, the *dictionary definition*. Cover story: 'Don't buy our album, it's rubbish!' I was *insane*..."

For two decades Steve Mason has been a singular creative renegade, a born outsider whose pioneering Beta Band were "punk rock anti-heroes who didn't want to be famous. I wanted to be part of an amazing art... *happening*". Following on from his King Biscuit Time and Black Affair projects, he's released music under his own name since 2009, including the delicately atmospheric Boys Outside (2010) and the "double political concept album" Monkey Minds In The Devil's Time (2013). His third album, Meet The Humans, is his most epic, affecting and joyously euphoric since the mythologised The Three EP's, urban hymnals echoing Shack, Sgt. Pepper and The Stone Roses, produced by Elbow's keyboard player/producer Craig Potter and recorded in their vast, one-thousand musician-capacity live room. Still buoyed by Mason's signature hypnotic grooves, these are irresistible *songs*, from the sumptuous, Elbow-esque Hardly Go Through ("I can hardly go through, without you, honey", he beseeches, devastatingly) to the towering Planet Sizes ("the universe makes me cry"), where soaring xylophones sound exactly, surely, how an astronaut feels aboard the Soyuz spacecraft at the moment of rocket detachment, pouring into space. Lyrically, he's yearning, breaking through "the darkness", his music the definition of melancholy beauty. "That's what I do," nods Steve, sipping a strong tea. "Every album I put out I expect it to change the world. And it doesn't happen. And it breaks your heart every time."

Eighteen months ago Mason changed his own world, moving to Hove because he didn't feel insane any more. Since 2002, he'd lived in rural Scotland "in isolation". First in a coastal village, then seven years of his 30s alone in a cottage in a wood, sporadically making music while resetting his aggressively destructive mind, a successful 10-year process culminating in "reintroducing myself to society" (hence the new album title). His high-ceilinged, rectangular living room is a makeshift studio housing old Beta Band instruments (no money for anything new), a single man's room spartanly sprinkled with books (Plato's Republic), CDs (Link Wray), DVDs (Jean-Luc Godard Collection: Volume 1), vinyl albums (compilation from '70s-'90s African liberation station Radio Freedom) and one pork pie hat, the sort "Heisenberg" wore in Breaking Bad. Brighton he chose for both its creative energies and already resident friends, including Primal Scream's Martin Duffy, whom he describes as "truly, a genius". He sips his tea, a strident, intense, dramatically honest character.

"It's still a novelty," he muses of his newly populated life. "I can walk to the pub, the record shop. There's women in this town I can meet! It's not just me and the turnips and the sheep."

Steve Mason was once "a kid like any other, a bit dark but I laughed a lot", a drummer in bands from aged 13 who became a car mechanic by trade. At 19, his parents announced their divorce, overnight (walked into his bedroom, out of the blue, and told him of his dad's affair), and the emotional shock triggered clinical depression, which deepened into "manic depression and agoraphobia" which was worsened by an increasing attraction to hallucinogenic drugs. He denounced his dad "forever", endured violent manic outbursts, smashed up instruments and possessions, started boozed-up fights in pubs, battling increasingly acute suicidal thoughts.

His nadir arrived in 2006, a "monumental breakdown", (he jumped in a river, drunk), before finding sustained professional help in anti-depressants, therapy and six-hour sessions of deep self-analysis through conscious hypnotherapy. It was "fucking exhausting; battling against yourself, it's far harder than battling against anything else, *far* harder". Once, in an anger relapse, he booted over the bin outside his woodland cottage, "and a deer popped its head up, rabbits went flying off, but at least I wasn't smashing up my own possessions any more".

"Every album I put out I expect it to change the world. And it doesn't happen. And it breaks your heart every time."

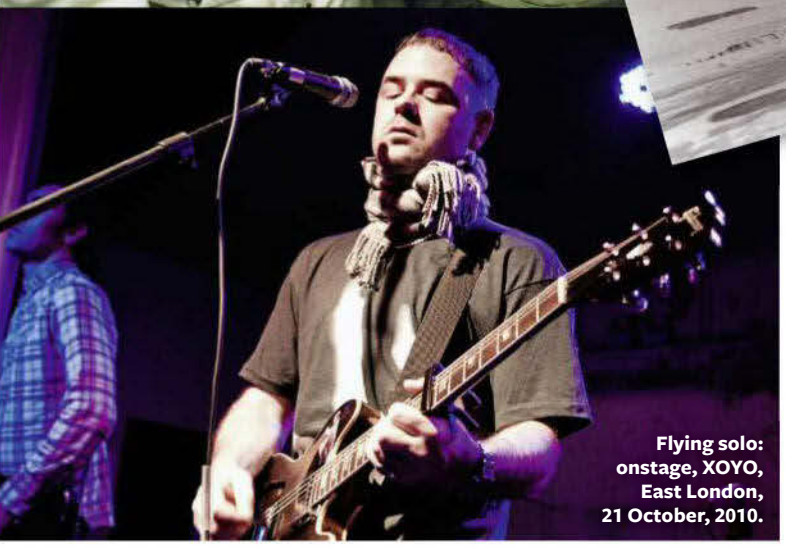
What do you do every night on your own like that?

"You masturbate. Heheheh!"

His life in the woods, on heavy medication, meant permanent "lethargy": up at 11am, breakfast, "have a few fags", internet, "a few more fags", TV, film, dinner, fall asleep, wake up, "work on music til 4am, but what I was really doing was sorting my head out". Today, he's "completely reconciled" with his dad. "You realise your parents are just people, they make mistakes, fall in and out of love, crash cars and fart, just like everyone else" and feels "genuinely happy, for the first time, I'm old and I love it". A pause. "I'd still like success though!" Three years ago he came off the anti-depressants completely. "Like that *[snaps fingers]*, which is very dangerous, it often leads to suicide." Instead, he's in psychological, musical and perhaps even romantic renaissance. "I want an actual proper relationship now," he chuckles. "Maybe a kid. I'm maybe mature and ready enough!"

XPOSURE.COM

Spacemen 4: The Beta Band, with Mason (second left) in 2002; (left) The Three EP's from 1998.



Flying solo: onstage, XOYO, East London, 21 October, 2010.

He opens his patio doors, puffs smoke into the garden.

"But I still don't feel like a grown-up," he declares. "I have the emotional intelligence of an 80-year-old man on his deathbed, but the everything else of a 25-year-old. Let's see who takes that on."

Steve Mason is, unusually, fearlessly opinionated. Engage him in politics and he's a powerhouse of profound scepticism. "Question everything," he urges, "on all sides." He rejects both party politics and the vote. "I don't agree with democracy." He views capitalism as the most destructive force on Earth. "It's catastrophic – love and compassion are not valued in capitalism, they're worthless." He deems all powerful politicians "psychopaths, by nature". He believes work should be abolished, too. "People give all their time, the most valuable thing, to work, because jobs are so badly paid now." He sees the planet's principal problem as "the Establishment", fuelled by the fear-generating news media, "this never-ending fantastical Muslim threat. We've been harassing the Islamic world since the Crusades. If you wanna find out where the problem lies, look at who's providing you with an enemy." His best alternative?

"It's not my job to provide an alternative," he baulks. "Read *[late-19th, early-20th century Russian anarchist]* Peter Kropotkin. *Find* alternatives. Get off your fucking arse. Change comes through small conversations. No one's gonna roll up, like The Young Ones, with a truck full of money and food. Change *yourself* first."

Mason's contribution to change is his art: Meet The Humans is an elevational search for human connection.

"In the darkest of times, art is at its most valuable," he avers. "I would never prize love and compassion more highly than I do now."

Disastrously for us all, then, music as a force for cultural change barely exists.

"Now, it's the entertainment industry," he scoffs. "Which encourages you to buy perfume. Musicians want money and fame. The sort of person willing to be a pop star is the sort of person willing to hand over power of attorney to the management company, the label, they're zipped up from day one, saying nothing, so fucking dull."

He despairs some more, over "not even middle, *upper*-class musicians" for whom music is "like a gap year". Much like Noel Gallagher on a state-of-the-nation address, he's soon vibrating with indignation.

"They're essentially little business people and I don't want those *fuckers* making music!" he roars. "I'd put them all in a fucking trash compactor. The whole system is set up against anything real coming through. Venues are being systematically closed down. Through noise complaint bullshit. There's no stepping-stone venues for bands. In 10, 20 years, this is gonna seem like some weird void. *Assuming* it gets better. But I can't see it. In 10 years' time there'll be one venue in town, owned by Vodafone, and on the outskirts the O2 Arena. That little venue, that'll be used for a press launch for an indie band and you'll get a load of fucking journalists down there, and their mates, and pretend it's a real fucking gig before they're scooted out to the O2 having been on Saturday night TV for the last five months on the Egg Factor. This is what's happening to the thing that we're involved in. People like me and Jason *[Williamson, of Sleaford Mods]* are the last generation of real people making music."

He puffs some more.

»

"Beats the forest...": Mason enjoys his creature comforts.

"I have the emotional intelligence of an 80-year-old man on his deathbed, but the everything else of a 25-year-old."

"I want art, based on reality!" he foams. "Not fake emotion written by songwriters, by committee, for incredibly handsome men and women, I don't give a fuck about *them*. I've just watched the Johnny Moped DVD *[Basically, Johnny Moped, a documentary about the chaotic proto-punk band]*, a bunch of scuzz balls, that's what I want and I want them to be successful! Privileged people go through stage school and learn how to do an interview and I *hate* it! They should be fucking banned. Their instruments taken off them and sent on a youth opportunities work scheme to learn about sweeping the fucking streets. And give their opportunities to people with real passion."

He clatters his mug on the table.

"I think we drink the Kool-Aid now," he declares with a bellow of rueful laughter.

A theme through Mason's art forever has been his preoccupation with the most staggering reality we know: our existence in the universe.

"Look up, what *is* all that?" marvels the man who lived alone for years, under the stars, with zero light pollution, in a forest. "We don't know what's out there. It might be teeming with life out there! Scientists, it's all just guesswork. And society sometimes feels like it's designed to drum all that romance and imagination out of you."

It's one of humanity's greatest disappointments, then, that we'll never get to Meet The Aliens.

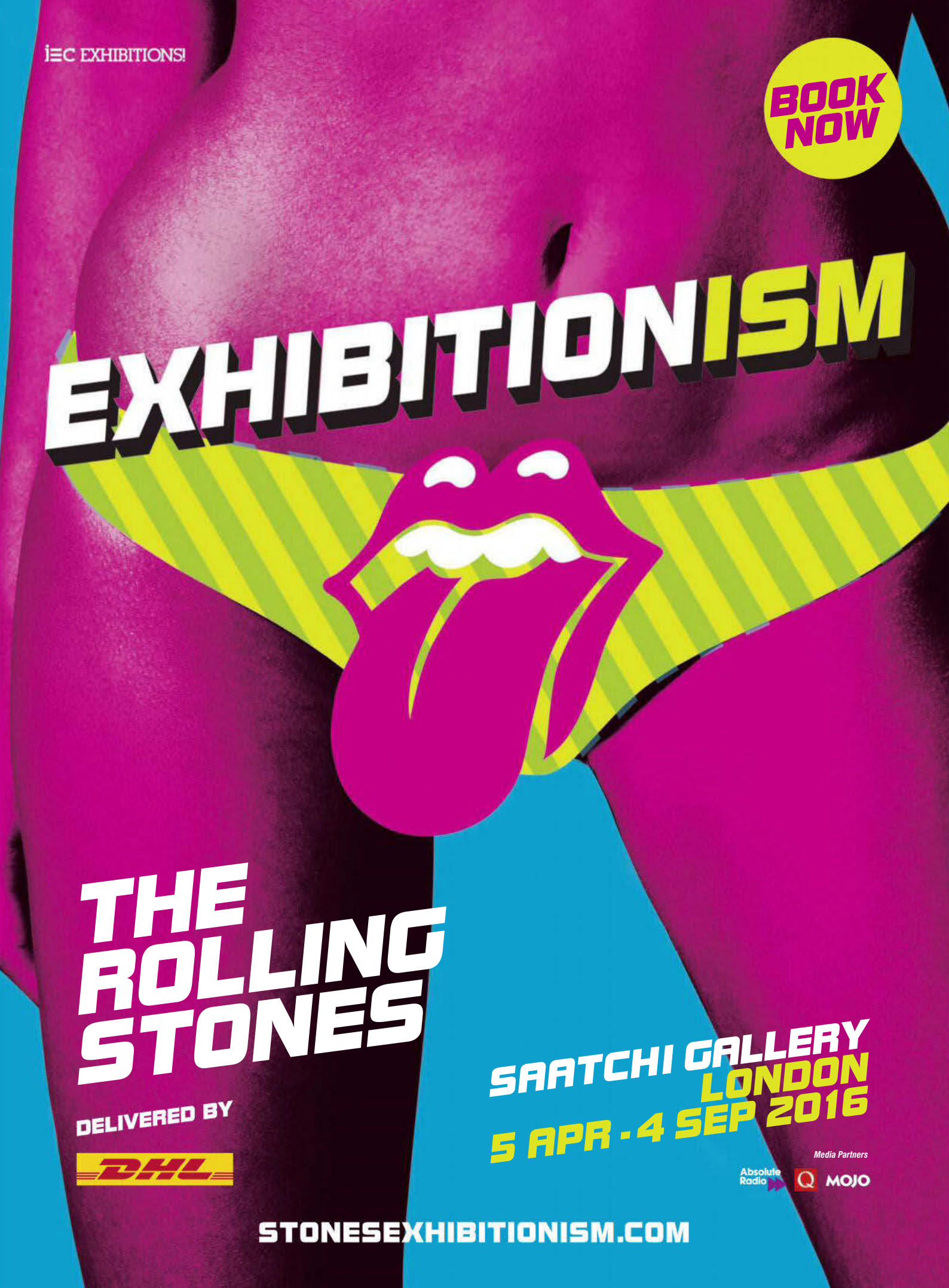
"Well, me and Martin Duffy have been working on that!" he hoots, hunting out a large, meticulously hand-written notebook detailing an on-going side-project, The Alien Stadium EP. One song, The Judgement, features an alien's speech on Earth (summoned by our Earthly heroes who've reached them with the message humanity has ruined everything). "Your sex is revolting, your love is a mess," he reads, cheerily. "Your sport self-indulgent, your art's in distress/D'you think we came here to spread love and peace?/My name is Angognu and I'm armed to the teeth/Your leaders are arseholes, your science is crap/And just for the record your planet is flat/We hate your religion, your food is too weak/Your language confusing, you're far from unique." There's also a dance song. "Called Titantic Dance because we're all basically dancing on the Titanic," he concludes. "We're all fucked, we may as well go out dancing. So we get melted on drugs and have a big party and go, 'Bollocks to it'. Which is basically what's happening anyway."

With fellow Hove resident and friend, Primal Scream's Martin Duffy.

Inside a pub in central Hove, near the sea, which bathes the planet, suspended in the unknowable universe, all is teeming with life. Mason's band is here, alongside Martin Duffy, as Mason DJs from his large-screened laptop, now playing a mid-'90s song from fellow revolutionary outlaw, Johnny Cash. Back in 1999, he'd announced his greatest lifelong ambition was to "make beautiful music, and have some fun". Looks like he's finally doing both. "Definitely," he affirms. "See? Everything I said was right. And that album *was* rubbish!" It's hard to believe, now, he was once a traumatised recluse, the Howard Hughes of transcendental art-pop.

"Redemption does exist," he nods, over a red wine. "I spent 10 years battling manic depression, anxiety and agoraphobia. Suicidal. And I reached an epiphany: you haven't actually killed me. I'm not dead. I thought, 'D'you know what? *Fuck you*. Let's fucking have it!' I came off anti-depressants and knew I'd kind of beaten it, y'know? It tried to get me so many times and never succeeded. So, I *won*."

He wanders outside for a roll-up on a crowded pavement, a laughing man in a badass hat, meeting the humans. Who probably wouldn't mind if some of those humans, finally, believed in him. Q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TRACKS OF MY YEARS

COURTNEY BARNETT

The Australian singer-songwriter reveals the songs that soundtracked her life. Includes sci-fi hip-hop bangers, "luscious" theatrical rock and camp goth musicals.

Giving it some wellies: Beastie Boys got a young Courtney jumping and singing.

1 SOFA-MOSHING WITH MY BROTHER

INTERGALACTIC, BEASTIE BOYS (1998)

"We only had one record and it was *[parent album]* Hello Nasty. I remember around 2000 my brother and me would play with Lego and we'd listen to this LP. If my mum and dad were out of the house, we'd jump on the couches and sing along. It had a lot of tracks on it and we'd just dance around to it. That was the first thing I ever heard by them. I was oblivious to their politics at the time."

Crowning glory: Queen's I Want To Break Free video is Barnett's favourite.

2 DREAMING OF BEING ONSTAGE

LITHIUM, NIRVANA (1991)

"I got Nevermind for my 10th birthday *[November 1997]*. We used to go on road trips from Sydney to Queensland with my family to go to the beach. I remember sitting in the car listening to that song specifically and just imagining what it would be like to be playing that on a stage to a crowd of people. It has that contrast between the verse and the chorus where the distortion is cranked up. I was a bit of an emo kid and I really connected with that line, 'I'm so happy 'cause today I've found my friends.' Did I know what lithium was? No way!"

3 A SEXUAL AWAKENING OF SORTS

TOUCH-A, TOUCH-A, TOUCH-A, TOUCH ME, SUSAN SARANDON (1975)

"That was a pretty monumental thing for me. When I was 11 or 12 we had a sleepover party and my friend put The Rocky Horror Picture Show movie on; but a couple of other kids in my class weren't allowed to watch it because their parents didn't want them to. When Susan Sarandon sang, 'Touch-a, touch-a, touch-a, touch me, I wanna be dirty' we didn't really understand what it meant. My friend had an older sister and she said, 'That means she wants to get pregnant.' That was my sexual awakening in a way – maybe. I've not been to a sing-along show but it's on my list of things to accomplish in my life. I'd probably go dressed as *[Dr Frank-N-Furter's maid]* Magenta."

The Rocky Horror Picture Show's Magenta (right): a fancy-dress inspiration for Barnett.

4 WATCHING FREDDIE IN DRAG

I WANT TO BREAK FREE, QUEEN (1984)

"I was really obsessed with Queen when I was a teenager. There was a lot going on in the songs and they went to places you didn't quite expect. They were theatrical and really interesting to me. They were very luscious-sounding. I was getting into the internet around then and I went on big Queen binges and would watch all their videos. The best was the one for this song with the vacuum cleaner. Everyone in drag. It's great."

5 MY PARTY PIECE

BLACKBIRD, THE BEATLES (1968)

"My parents didn't have any Beatles records so my first way into it was when my guitar teacher was like, 'The White Album is the greatest record ever made.' I felt a triumph at being able to play it all the way through. It took me a couple of weeks to crack it. Sometimes I pull it out now as a party piece. It's a pretty classic one to play."

6 WORKING IN A GAY BAR

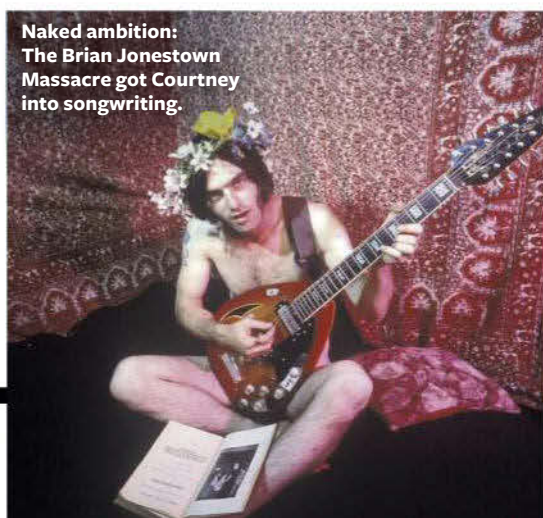
KICK IT, PEACHES (2003)

"I had moved into my first rental house in Hobart, Tasmania, and was sharing with my friend. All our friends thought we were weird because we loved Peaches. I was 18 or 19 and had started clubbing and was working at a gay bar. I saw Peaches live a few times and I found her very inspiring. Being yourself and being honest doesn't necessarily have to mean in a sexual way."

7 CHANNELLING A BAD BREAK-UP INTO MY FIRST EP

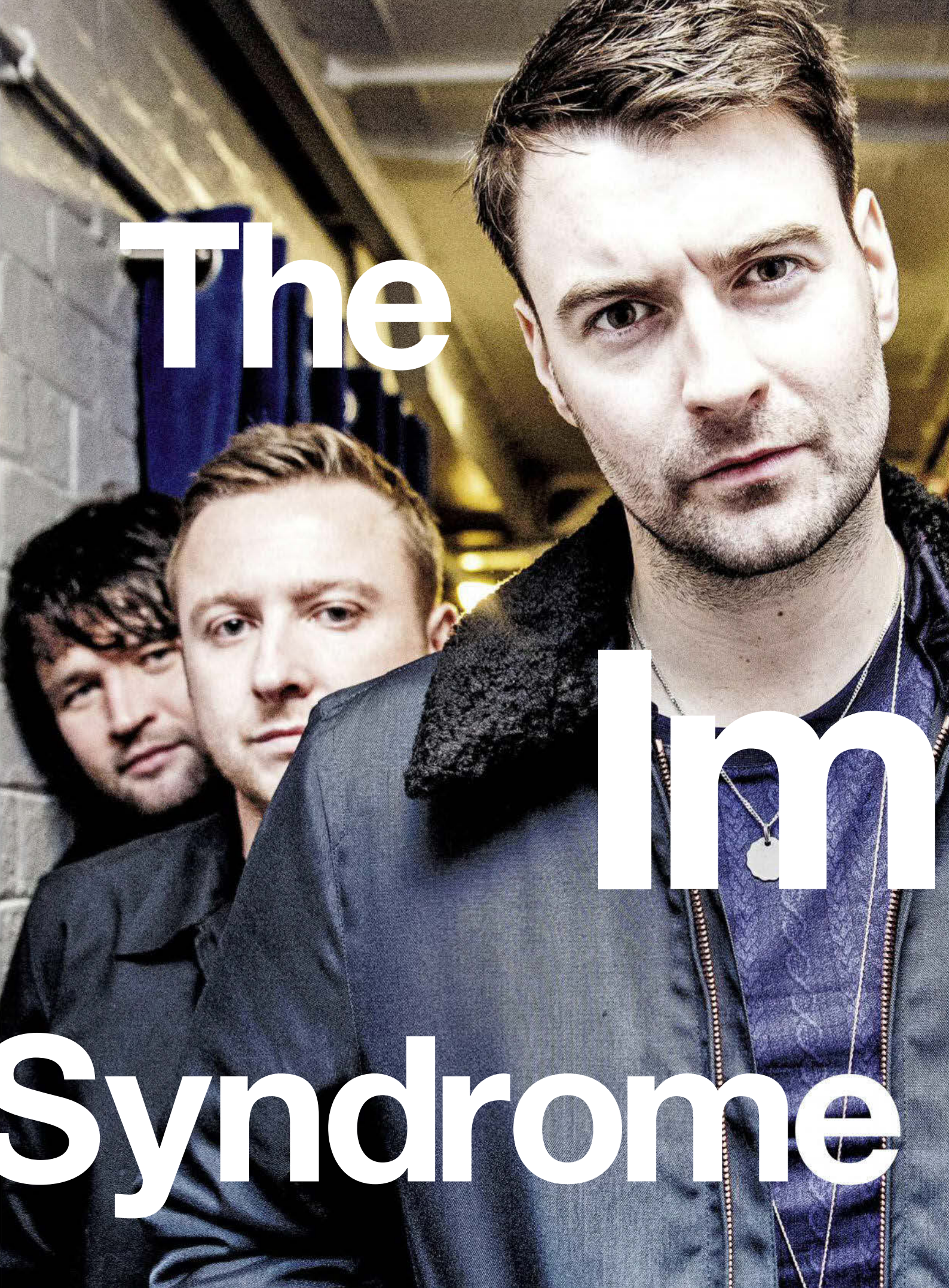
BALLAD OF JIM JONES, THE BRIAN JONESTOWN MASSACRE (1996)

"Around 2011, I'd just broken up with someone after a long relationship. I moved to another part of town and was really depressed and miserable. I'd just sit in my room on Valium listening to a friend's iPod that had every Jonestown album on it. That was when I started writing the songs for my first EP. It got me thinking about songwriting in a different way."



Naked ambition: The Brian Jonestown Massacre got Courtney into songwriting.

WORDS: EAMONN FORDE PHOTOS: JONAS STEADMAN, PHOTOSHOT, ALLSTAR


The
Im
Syndrome

Few British bands sold as many tickets as The Courteeners last year. Even fewer inspire such loyal, impassioned support from their fans. So why do they feel like outsiders, constantly expecting to be told they're the wrong side of the rope? "I know why people hate us," frontman Liam Fray tells Simon Goddard...

PHOTOGRAPHS SIMON SARIN

postor

The Courteeners: (from left) Michael Campbell, Adam Payne, Liam Fray, Daniel Moores and Joe Cross, backstage at Manchester O2 Apollo, 8 December, 2015.

It's 9.15pm, Friday night,

about the time Liam Fray should be walking onstage at London's Shepherd's Bush Empire for a sold-out show with his band, The Courteeners. Except that the venue which ought to be a hothouse of overexcited kids screaming Fray's lyrics about ex-girlfriends, school and drunken nights out back at him stands spookily empty; a Mary Celeste of silent PA, unmanned merch stand and wasted rider rotting in a darkened dressing room. As the sorry and deflated fans being turned away at the door are told, a last minute safety inspection revealed "serious structural damage" to the Empire's roof. Nobody is taking any chances. The gig is cancelled, and so Fray and his band drown their disappointment in the bar of their hotel next door: less than 100 yards from the stage where they soundchecked not two hours ago, audibly primed to bring the house down – if unaware that task was dangerously simpler than anyone dared imagine.

Fray is a gregarious, down-to-earth Northern lad much like his core audience. Full of unused gig adrenalin, he's spent the last hour decompressing while fielding the inevitable social media flack: sceptics who don't buy the cancellation excuse, angry punters airing their grievances of travel and hotel costs, and tweeted appeals to compensate, either by "coming out for a pint?" or an impromptu acoustic set on Shepherd's Bush Green. "Think the only thing for it is to sink some of these," he shrugs, raising a bottle. "What can you do?"

If he seems remarkably at ease for a singer who's just had the rug pulled from under him it's testament to 10 years battling adversity and exclusion. The Courteeners' story is that of a Northern guitar band whose road to success has been hard travelled on the back roads of un-hyped grass roots support. Their best tunes are air-punch catchy, their unaffected lyrics resonating with ordinary lives and everyday

"We're an anomaly. We weren't quite laddy enough for the lads and we weren't cool enough for the cool kids."
Liam Fray

(Main pic) Liam Fray onstage, Manchester O2 Apollo, 2015; (below) the band in 2007, with now departed bassist, Mark Cuppello (far left).

loves. To best understand them in three minutes is to see them perform Please Don't from their defining 2008 debut, St Jude, a song about breaking up with somebody because you hate their taste in music. "Do you remember that time I raised my voice/Because you said you'd never ever heard of The La's?" It's a rare night Fray sings it unaccompanied by the entire crowd. Add to this the detail that they ceremonially walk onstage to a communal karaoke of Oasis's Morning Glory, play a fan favourite B-side called Smiths Disco and regularly incorporate brief medley homages to The Stone Roses, James and The Libertines, and the appeal is obvious. The Courteeners are a band of sentimental fans making music for sentimental fans of bands.

"I know why people hate us," laughs Fray, "because they think we're so derivative. But I was reading *[political commentator]* Owen Jones's book The Establishment when he talks about 'impostor syndrome' and it made me think of The Courteeners. Jones was talking about the 4 per cent of people who get into Oxford and Cambridge from a working-class background. They're surrounded by confident, middle-class people and feel like any minute someone's going to tap them on the shoulder and say, 'What are *you* doing here?' We feel a bit like that. As a band, we've got the credentials, but it's like we're not wanted in the club."

That The Courteeners are still standing is down to their resilience, embracing their uninvited outsider status as a badge of honour. Their online fan pages proudly declare "our band, not theirs" and the phenomenal loyalty of the "our" contingent was never more apparent than in 2015. Between their summer headline show at Heaton Park and a record-breaking seven-night residency at the Manchester Apollo they sold 50,000 tickets in their native city alone. By the year's end, with their charity Christmas single for Shelter, Winter Wonderland, they finally made Radio 2's Record Of The Week, also joining the first confirmed names for Reading & Leeds 2016, third from top. The doomed Shepherd's Bush gig sold out in under an hour, forcing a second London show at The Forum, selling out just as fast. "We're not big, or famous," Fray insists, "but we're connecting with just enough people for it to matter."

And yet their critics remain not merely baffled but indignant: a recent online article analysing their appeal was titled "How I Tried To Understand Why People Like The Band I Hate The Most". Statistically, nobody can deny The Courteeners are a popular ticket: their only handicap, as Fray acknowledges, has been that they've never been a "cool" ticket. "We're an anomaly. When we started we weren't quite laddy enough for the lads and we weren't cool enough for the cool kids. And that's still the case. We don't get played on Radio 1. Four albums in, and we've never been on Jools Holland. Nobody outside of Manchester really knows who the fuck we are. We've just never fitted in."

The brotherhood of misfits harks back to the Britpop autumn of 1996 at Cardinal Langley RC High School in Middleton, halfway between Manchester and Rochdale, where the 11-year-old Fray first met guitarist Daniel Moores. Nicknamed "Conan" at primary school (for reasons he can't properly remember), the ice-breaker was Moores's SuperTed pencil case.

"This was before anyone knew about irony," laughs Fray. "I thought Conan was really strange, a bit of a nutter. So I decided to keep him close." By their mid-teens Fray, Moores, future drummer Michael Campbell and two friends were playing Oasis and Stereophonics covers in their first band, The Calms. "Which stood for Conan, Adam, Liam, Mike and Steve," cringes Fray. "I know. *Terrible* name. We sounded like an anti-anxiety drink."

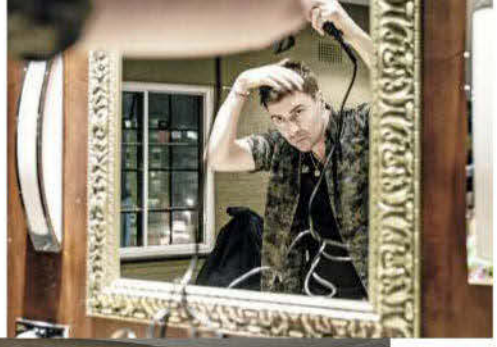
Fifteen years on, the offstage banter amongst The Courteeners remains that of a tight circle of mates larking around on a never-ending school trip. There is, however, some sadness to this tour, »

their first since the departure of original bassist Mark Cuppello. According to an official statement he left "by mutual agreement". Raising the subject with Fray prompts much fidgeting and cautious word choosing. "I don't want to speak ill of Mark," he says eventually. "I still love him and still think of him as my brother. But it hadn't been like The Gang we thought it was when we were 16. Not for a long time, really. I don't think Mark was enjoying himself. We all grow and change and we become different people. Things just run their course."

Cuppello's replacement is Joe Cross, producer of third and fourth albums Anna (2013) and Concrete Love (2014), for whom the past fortnight has been an unexpectedly eventful baptism of fire. The tour began in Leeds where Radio X host Chris Moyles's planned stage introduction was silenced by boos, climaxing with a full pint hitting him bullseye on the head. Phone footage of the incident went viral. "I heard later that he'd previously been slagging us off on air," smirks Fray. "So, yeah, whoever threw that pint is guest-listed for life."

Six days later, their Glasgow gig witnessed two arrests for breach of the peace outside the O2 Academy, adding to Fray's fears their audience are still being targeted by organised gangs of phone thieves as they have been in the past. The Shepherd's Bush cancellation only compounds the drama which continues the following night when they play to a hot and euphoric crowd in Kentish Town. Halfway through the encore, a freshly-lit flare is hurled from the stalls over Fray's head. Toxic smoke obscures the stage. The music splutters to a halt. So soon after Paris, it's an especially stupid thing for any concert-goer to do. Fray identifies the culprit and duly goes ballistic over the mic. "Think you're hard, you little prick?" The offender and his pals refuse to leave but the audience are on Fray's side. "I can't wait for that gang of tosspots there to get on Twitter tonight and give me as much shit as you want! Cos I'll still be here playing to two and a half thousand fucking people singing our songs!" The crowd's cheer is deafening. At the final whistle it's Courteeners 1, Idiots 0.

"Apart from that, I think that was the best London show we've ever played," Fray says by way of post-match analysis. "The bottom line is nobody should go onstage and expect to have anything thrown at them, really." He pauses, a canny twinkle in his eye. "Apart from Chris Moyles."



Blown away: (from top) backstage at the O2 Forum, Kentish Town, London, 5 December, 2015.

Three days later, Fray greets us backstage at his "favourite venue in the world", Manchester's Apollo theatre. Originally built in the late 1930s as an art-deco cinema and variety hall, among its many claims to fame is as the building where Morrissey and Marr first met at a Patti Smith concert in 1978, although Fray's misty-eyed attachment has more to do with his teenage rites of passage in the moshpit watching Ian Brown and The Strokes. Tonight he's about to make his own mark on its history fronting the first band ever to play five consecutive nights here, with demand necessitating a further two shows a week later.

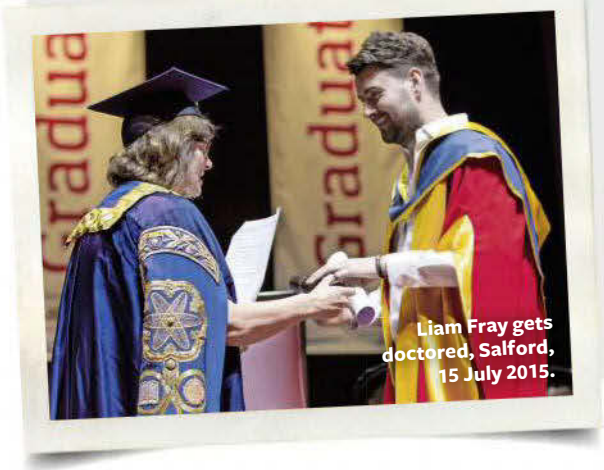
Manchester and The Courteeners remain reciprocally in love, the city Fray still calls home, albeit a rented flat. "With no dishwasher," he mourns. "I don't own a house, or a car, and I haven't got any kids. I've got a phone bill and that's as much of a pain in the arse responsibility as I can handle." Now 30, Fray is very conscious of the fact that unlike his happily married friends back in Middleton he's yet to settle down. "I don't think they're jealous of my lifestyle at all. It's the other way round. My mates are like, 'Get a grip, lad! When are you going to sort yourself out?'"

He jokes about his previous "Celebrity Couple" experience dating Sky Sports presenter Hayley McQueen, of whom he's still fond. "Hayley's a real sweetheart and we had a lot of fun, but we realised we were very different people. It's funny, cos I'd get told, 'It must be every lad's dream, being with a sports presenter.' But the reality is you're out trying to have a romantic drink and guys keep interrupting to ask her about the latest Tottenham transfer." Today, he's happily "a year or so" into a new relationship. "I absolutely adore her," he says of his girlfriend, "but

Doctor Fray, I Presume?

The Courteeners' frontman on receiving academic honours

"In July 2015, the University of Salford awarded me an honorary doctorate. I suppose I felt a bit embarrassed at first, like I didn't deserve it, because I did go to Salford Uni, 11 years ago, doing economics and then creative writing, but I dropped out and never finished. Before the ceremony I found out that Johnny Marr had also received a doctorate, as had Gary Neville. Now I was looking at photos of them online. They provide you with the cap and gown. When Gary got his, he wore the cap. Johnny didn't, and I have to say he looked a lot cooler than Gary. So when it got to the day and they told me to put the cap on, I politely refused. They were very insistent. I wouldn't say it got heated, but they *really* wanted it on my head. But I told them, 'Sorry, Johnny Marr didn't, and I'm not gonna either.' So I collected it without the cap, but it was all good in the end. I mean it is, literally, an incredible honour. So, yes, you can call me Dr Fray! Doctor of the arts. No matter how many times I say it, I still can't get used to it."



Liam Fray gets doctored, Salford, 15 July 2015.

she has to put up with a lot of the circus that surrounds this, so it's hard. It doesn't get any easier."

If Fray's emotional unease has been The Courteeners' most powerful muse so far, fans will be relieved to know the fifth album is already shaping up to deliver more of the same. "Love songs about Northern life, miserablist romanticism with a twinge of humour and a fucking dollop of sarcasm," describes Fray. He teases a chorus of one track describing a mad night out in North London. "Seven Sisters/Got me twisted/In a listed building last week," he sings. "I think this next record is going to be really taut. It's not going to be our Elbow moment. More like Daft Punk or LCD Soundsystem. The songs are really poppy, but tight and controlled."

"Tight and controlled" perfectly describes the first of the seven Apollo shows, the high tension set paced to keep the home crowd hollering and the seated balcony on its feet for the duration. But it's the songs from debut St Jude in particular that still echo loudest around the auditorium. Here in the faces of sweat-soaked Perry boys, arms raised like a human catapult, eyes closed as they chant every syllable of Not Nineteen Forever and What Took You So Long?, is the "our band, not theirs" mantra made manifest. Fray loiters alone at the end to say a heartfelt thank you, shaking hands in the front row and distributing flowers from a bouquet thrown onstage earlier. "I think our fanbase is so fervent because we're so much in it together," he says back in the dressing room. "I do feel a definite responsibility not to let them down. But at the same time I think they respect change."

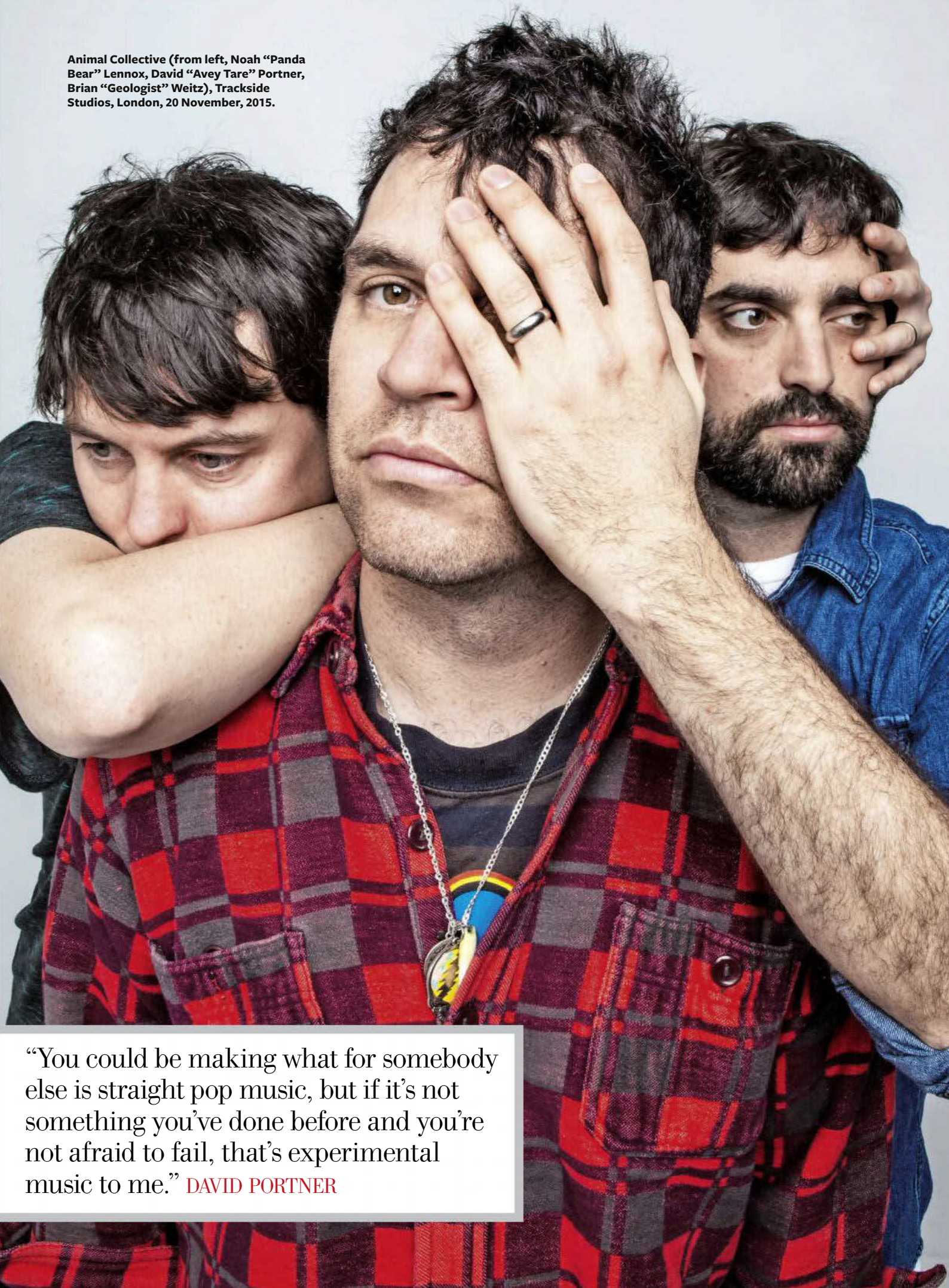
A few swigs of vodka and tonic later and Fray is off on a tangent about the psychological concept of the "hedonic treadmill". "I read about it last week," he begins. "It's where you have to keep going just to stay in the same place, and you never get happier. And I thought, 'Fuck that!' I think we always have to look to the next thing. Not necessarily the next *big* thing, but something different. So I'm really, really excited about our future, because I think we've so much more to offer. Even though we'll probably never lose that outsider thing."

Fray may yet protest the twinge of pop impostor syndrome, but this tour has proven there's nothing small, or silent, about The Courteeners' perceived minority. Rather, the message to their non-believers, as spelt out by their epic Apollo residency alone, is something akin to the contrary wisdom of Groucho Marx. What self-respecting outsider would want to join any club that would have someone like them as a member? Q

"We have to look to the next thing. I'm excited about our future. Even though we'll never lose that outsider thing."
Liam Fray

RICHARD MEFTAH UNIVERSITY OF SALFORD

Come all ye faithful: Fray feels the hometown love, Manchester O2 Apollo, 8 December, 2015.



Animal Collective (from left, Noah "Panda Bear" Lennox, David "Avey Tare" Portner, Brian "Geologist" Weitz), Trackside Studios, London, 20 November, 2015.

"You could be making what for somebody else is straight pop music, but if it's not something you've done before and you're not afraid to fail, that's experimental music to me." DAVID PORTNER

PORTRAITS ALEX LAKE

ANIMAL COLLECTIVE

The product of liberal parenting, inquisitive minds and a regular intake of hallucinogens in the Maryland suburbs, Animal Collective have been at the forefront of experimental music for 15 years. Keith Cameron meets the three active members of the group to hear how they got big without even thinking about it.

Wondering how Animal Collective spend their downtime on a brief visit to London elicits various responses. Some are probably what you would expect from America's foremost questing pop band as they imbibe the hipster ambrosia of Shoreditch's Ace Hotel. The previous evening saw them in the familiar cocoon of a recording studio, where they listened to a test pressing of their new album, Painting With. The studio's engineer, hearing the record's mind-boggling electro-bricolage for the first time, delivered an appraisal that critics will struggle to improve upon.

"He said, 'I can't tell if these are simple songs with complicated arrangements or vice versa,'" Animal Collective's David Portner smiles, approvingly.

According to Collective colleague Noah Lennox, there has been much "mellowing out at the hotel", very likely involving the use of hand-held devices. With all members living in different US cities, and in the case of Lennox, a different continent, Animal Collective seem fully plugged-in model citizens of the Web 2.0 era. The creative seeds for their new album, as with its immediate predecessors, came with an exchange of text messages and video clips pinging across the wirelessly connected globe, from Los Angeles to Baltimore, Portugal to Washington, DC. "At least two of us are talking every day with YouTube links or photos," says Brian Weitz, Animal Collective's DC resident. "We don't intend to talk about work, but especially if it's YouTube and something we find inspiring, that'll lead into getting the ideas for the next record."

Today's recreation, however, conforms less to stereotype. Once their schedule of interviews and photoshoots is completed, all three Animal Collective members are off to the New Wimbledon Theatre for An Evening With Noel Fielding. They are long-time fans of the Mighty Boosh mastermind. In a 2012 Best Of list for the Brooklyn Vegan blog, they nominated Fielding's Luxury Comedy series in their Top 10 Things Of The Year, alongside albums by outré London experimental pop crew Micachu & The Shapes, Wolverhampton ambient techno producer Actress, and Black Dice, the Brooklyn avant-noise trio who mentored Animal Collective during the band's fledgling years. Portner is quivering at the prospect of finally seeing his stand-up hero onstage.

"He's been a big inspiration for us, ever since The Mighty Boosh – one of the funniest guys of my lifetime." He's really not kidding. "Yeah! Excited to see him in person."

Actually, Animal Collective and The Mighty Boosh do share characteristics. Both revolve around a core cast of characters whose membership is given to flux. There's the use of alias identities, with a side order of anthropomorphism. While Boosh has Vince Noir, Naboo The Enigma, Bob Fossil and Bollo the gorilla, in Animal Collective guise Portner is Avey Tare, Weitz becomes Geologist and Lennox is better known as Panda Bear. Absent from the new album »

and Q's interview, but still officially an Animal Collective member, is Josh Dibb, aka Deakin. And Boosh aficionados would surely recognise a parallel in AC's preoccupation with infantile vocalese and surreal, hypomanic soundworlds, where familiar musical modes are subverted and overdriven to illogical extremes, to disorientating, but spectacular effect.

"I would say our music aims for a balance of order *and* chaos," says Portner. "Being open to chaos. Taking a step out there, going in some new direction. You could be making what for somebody else is the most straight pop music ever, but if it's not something you've ever done before and you're not afraid to fail, that's the nature of experimental music to me – rather than just making noise."

Stepping "out there" and seeking a "new direction" are pretty much the only constant elements in Animal Collective, a 15-year trip that began in idyllic suburban Baltimore, moved through the arty grotholes of Manhattan and Brooklyn before ultimately propelling its architects to the top of festival bills. Now they are equally at home playing New York's Guggenheim Museum or collaborating with Daft Punk, as Panda Bear did on Random Access Memories. Each new recorded work has been markedly different, as if in allergic reaction to its predecessor, and only two members – Lennox and Portner – have played on every one of the 10 studio records that are considered Animal Collective albums.

Indeed, attribution is problematic for those seeking to pin down the band's essence: the Animal Collective name wasn't properly applied until their fourth self-released album, 2003's Here Comes The Indian, which was also the first to feature all four members. Prior to that, records were credited according to who had played on them: thus the fractured dream-pop of 2000 debut, Spirit They're Gone, Spirit They've Vanished, was by Avey Tare And Panda Bear, and its follow-up Danse Manatee by Avey Tare, Panda Bear And Geologist. Those who delighted to the latter's seemingly improvised blasts of teeth-grinding electro-distortion and screams were presumably confused when its successor, titled (and credited to) Campfire Songs – Dibb's debut – featured five epic acoustic guitar drones recorded live on a Maryland back porch, augmented by mostly wordless chanting and rain. Not that finally electing to put "Animal Collective" brought clarity, as Here Comes The Indian saw the group buckling under the strains of accommodating all its incongruent parts, attempting shoestring budget tours with money borrowed from parents and juggling day-jobs. No sooner had Animal Collective finally made a record with every Animal present, than one decided he'd had enough – Weitz, the only member to complete his university degree, quit to find legitimate work as an environmental scientist. "We had such a crazy stressful time with Here Comes The Indian, it created a lot of friction and I needed to clear my head," he says. "The band was ruining our friendship."

Boston University religious studies dropout Noah Lennox gives a rueful smile. "He has always been the smart one," he says.

Wild things: Animal Collective (from left, Lennox, Weitz, Portner and Josh "Deakin" Dibb), 2005.

It would have been a stretch to predict one of the people responsible for Here Comes The Indian's challenging fricassee of tribal shrieks and synthetic excretions would in 10 years' time appear on a Grammy-winning Number 1 album. But the shock of Weitz leaving impelled a degree of clarity upon Lennox and Portner, who proceeded to make 2004's relatively cohesive Sung Tongs as a duo, focusing in on a primitive pop essence that unites their otherwise oppositional tastes. It's one of Animal Collective's many quirks that its principal songwriters seem musically and even personally quite distant from one another. Although he befriended Dibb at kindergarten, Lennox did not attend the same high school where in the early '90s the other three Animals began playing music together, bonding over a mutual appreciation of indie rock and psychedelic drugs. Lennox had remained friends with Dibb, however, and joined the gang at weekends. Even then, his interaction with Portner was wary.

"Josh had all these songs that he would play with Noah and they needed a keyboard player," says Portner. "Josh asked if I would play with Noah and him, so I went over to

GETTY

THE BEST OF ANIMAL COLLECTIVE

A journey through epic psych-pop, frazzled freak-folk and beyond...

1 Avey Tare And Panda Bear
ALVIN ROW
Spirit They're Gone, Spirit They've Vanished (2000)
AC set out their stall with this 12-minute, sun-frazzled psych-pop epic.

2 Campfire Songs
QUEEN IN MY PICTURES
Campfire Songs (2003)
After the extremes of Danse Manatee, this massed acoustic guitar nirvana suggested AC were more than mere miscreants.

3 Animal Collective
WHO COULD WIN A RABBIT
Sung Tongs (2004)
A return to the idealised childhood of their first recordings, but AC had now honed their melodic instincts. Like CBeebies on acid.

4 Animal Collective
COLLEGE
Sung Tongs (2004)
A 53-second slacker anthem-cum-Beach Boys pastiche, its sole lyric – "You don't have to go to college" – was the closest AC would get to an overt political statement.

"Like CBeebies on acid." Live in Washington, DC, July 2011.

Animal attraction: Noel Fielding.

> "Noel Fielding's been a big inspiration for us since The Mighty Boosh – one of the funniest guys of my lifetime." DAVID PORTNER

Noah's house, he was playing drums. I think for the first couple of years of our friendship me and Noah never really spoke to each other. It was always more about playing and sweating for two or three hours."

While Lennox was into techno and Aphex Twin, Portner favoured the skronkier aspects of underground rock. His friendship with Weitz had solidified over a shared love of Pavement, although their original introduction came via a rather more unlikely musical route, given that these were mid-'90s teenagers. "Brian and I were both in the soccer team," says Portner, "and a friend of his who I knew from grade school introduced us: 'I think you guys would get along. Look, you're both wearing Grateful Dead T-shirts!'"

The discovery of a fellow Deadhead, plus the group's ingestion of LSD and mushrooms in the sylvan countryside of Baltimore County, encouraged Portner to coalesce his core musical philosophy, one that would mainline deep into Animal Collective's core. "The Grateful Dead are a punk band to me," he says. "People tend to think of the Dead just in terms of jamming and stoners, but they were all about an openness to failure. That's the road to feeling successful."

Artistic bravery and accommodating »

5 Animal Collective
IT'S YOU Prospect Hummer EP (2005)
AC earned their freak-folk stripes by creating a suitably moist backwoods backing for the returning '60s enigma Vashti Bunyan.

6 Panda Bear
BROS Person Pitch (2007)
Amid a carillon of homespun beats and heavenly harmonising, Bros is a 12-minute teenage symphony to God, reconfigured for the digital age.

7 Animal Collective
FOR REVEREND GREEN Strawberry Jam (2007)
David "Avey Tare" Portner leads this technofied New Orleans street party on the sweetest, meatiest AC record thus far.

8 Animal Collective
MY GIRLS Merriweather Post Pavilion (2009)
The raved-up pop confection My Girls is an immediate ode to joy on the album which remains AC's dizzying peak.

9 Animal Collective
TODAY'S SUPERNATURAL Centipede Hz (2012)
The return of Josh "Deakin" Dibb saw AC over-egg their freakadelic omelette, but there's real power amid its dense rhythms.

10 Animal Collective
FLORIDADA Painting With (2016)
Recorded in LA's famed EastWest studio, the latest AC is an aptly elaborate design that packs an instant pop-art punch.

divergent points of view have become defining Animal Collective characteristics. Doubtless the seeds for this were sown in their archetypal liberal middle-class upbringings: both Lennox and Portner's fathers were doctors and all four members went to progressive private schools, with Lennox, in particular, encouraged to think beyond conventional norms both by attendance at Waldorf holistic learning establishments and also his parents' supportive attitude. The first Animal Collective tour van actually belonged to Lennox's mum. And when they broke the integrity of the roof by placing a storage case full of drums on top, she helped them get a new one.

"In terms of education my parents were very hands-off – 'Do what you will, figure it out,'" he says. "Which worked out really well in some ways, but on the other hand, I'm studying religion at university for no practical reason. I've talked to them about it since and asked if they were upset or unhappy about decisions I had made. My mom said she was a little nervous but she wanted to see what happened."

Come the making of the seventh Animal Collective album, Strawberry Jam, in 2007, such parental investment looked to have been thoroughly vindicated. Having survived the trauma of the death of Lennox's father in 2004 and his subsequent relocation to Portugal, where he married and began his own family, the band was by now a firmly established self-sufficient entity. With Brian Weitz having quit the high-powered world of ocean and climate-change politics on Capitol Hill, they had now enjoyed the same full-strength line-up for two successive albums for the first time and were newly signed to premier UK indie label Domino. But there was turbulence beneath the surface, as Dibb left the band in the midst of a gruelling tour schedule just as they seemed positioned for commercial breakthrough.

"Josh wasn't able to devote any time to anything else, any emotions he was having. He was focusing so much on the Animal Collective machine," says Portner. "When we got down to touring Strawberry Jam it was too intense for him, he broke down, he just couldn't take it. It became necessary for him to step away and clear his mind."

> "Merriweather was just serendipitous. Suddenly selling out big halls became normal for us. Looking back now, it's crazy we ever reached that point." DAVID PORTNER

Since Dibb's guitar playing had become increasingly fundamental to their sound, his departure could have precipitated the end for a more conventionally ordered band. But Animal Collective simply reached for a new opportunity, a new direction. Nurtured by Portner's faith in the freedom to fail, almost inevitably, the next move propelled them to new heights: Merriweather Post Pavilion took its cues from the devotional beauty of Panda Bear's third solo album, Person Pitch, and smashed the cosmic shell of its creators' imagination, in the process turning on a new generation of fans with its rich synthetic textures, pulsing beats and vocal harmonies apparently rescued from a lost drawer in Brian Wilson's brain.

"Merriweather was just serendipitous," smiles Portner. "It seemed like we were in the right place at the right time. It's one of the records we're most proud of because we felt good the whole way. Suddenly selling out big halls became normal for us. Looking back now, it's crazy we ever reached that point. I never expected it."

Today's three members of the Animal Collective drain their coffees and check their phones. Boosh-time is still half a day away but two hours nearer than when they began talking to Q. Their Fielding fandom really isn't so incongruous, given the feral chaos of those earlier AC records. Even their new album, although intricately constructed, retains the vibrancy and anarchic impulses that their younger selves would recognise. Portner reveals that one of their initial text-message plans for Painting With was "Techno Ramones". "So naturally," says Lennox, poker-faced, "this is our first full zero-guitar record." Like all the best comedians, Animal Collective are deadly serious when it comes to laughter. Q

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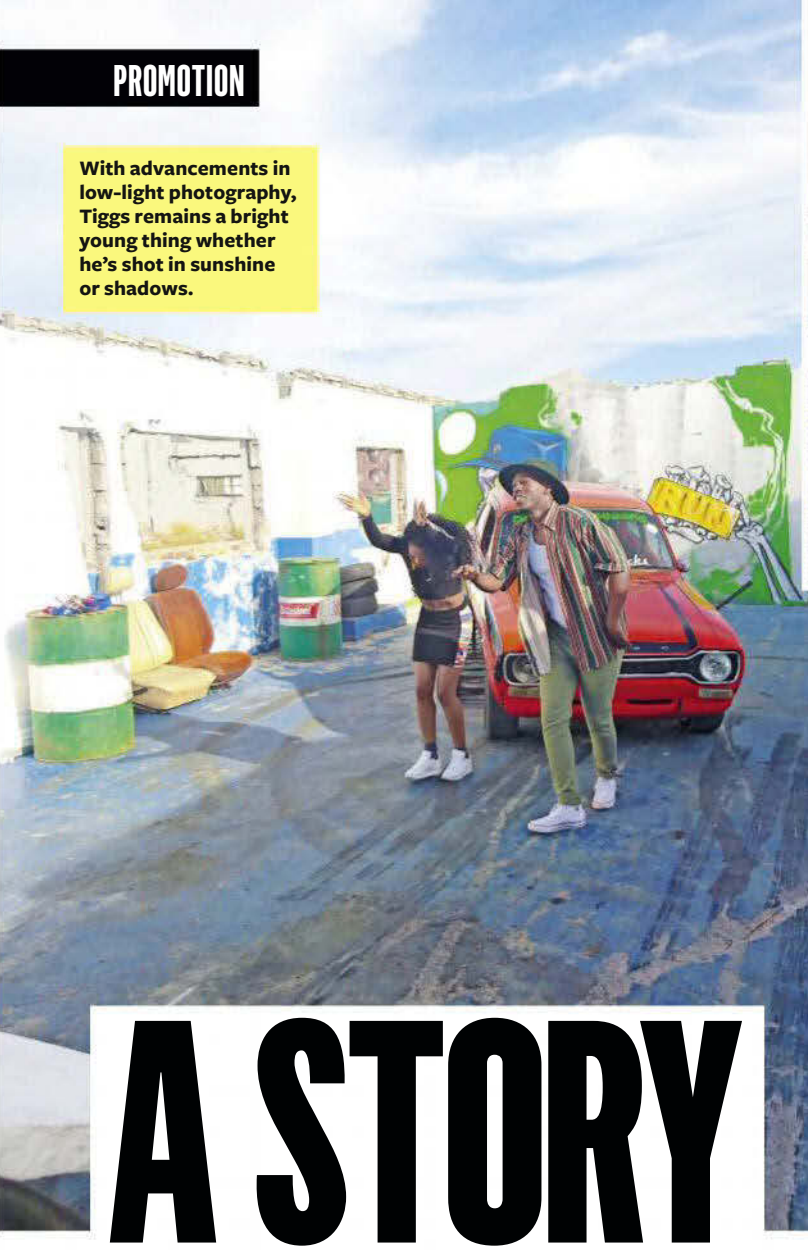
With advancements in low-light photography, Tiggs remains a bright young thing whether he's shot in sunshine or shadows.



A STORY THAT LOOKS AS GOOD AS IT SOUNDS

Sony's Xperia Z5 captures the best action behind the scenes at Tiggs Da Author's spectacular new video shoot.

It's of fundamental importance to a recording artist that their songs sound good. That's a given. However, it's also quite useful for their songs to *look* good too – ie, have excellent videos to accompany them.

With that in mind, London-based singer/songwriter Tiggs Da Author recently headed to South Africa to make a video for his excellent track Run (out now), by getting involved in the high-action motorsport of spinning. In short, spinning involves locking a car into a spin at speed and getting out and dancing around – or on – the car as it continues to whip about in a cloud of burning, screeching rubber. Sure, there are probably quite a few safer ways to make a video but the results won't be as eye-catching.

Q travelled with Tiggs to capture the making of the video on a Sony Xperia Z5 smartphone. Possessing the best camera in a smartphone, it makes the story of the video look as spectacular as the finished promo itself. A faster-than-the-blink-of-an-eye autofocus caught all the spontaneity and fleeting moments of the day – including all the high-octane car-top madness, Tiggs's fiercest dance moves and some very professional-looking portraiture of one of music's fastest-rising stars.

The 5x Clear Image Zoom meant we could retreat to a safe distance from the action and still get these incredible shots, while advancements in low-light technology ensured the Z5 handled any lighting that the

Tiggs Da Author, a sharp man by nature, looks even sharper thanks to the Z5's 23MP camera which captures colours in their truest form.

AUTHOR'S STORY

Meet Tiggs Da Author, the video star spinning a unique blend of Tanzanian jazz, classic soul and modern beats.

When Tiggs Da Author relocated from Dar es Salaam in Tanzania to London, he was eight. Their arrival amid snow and "weird" weather was a shock. However, this shift between two contrasting cities would later deliver the musical backdrop to 2015's breakout single, Georgia, which took cues from Tanzania's jazz clubs and the London underground dance scene.

"When I arrived it was the first time I'd had to wear a jacket," says Tiggs, also known as Adam Simon. "But I've got the south London influence in me. I liked a lot of grime as a kid, but I couldn't escape the Tanzanian culture. I went back there when I was 19 and my uncle took me to the jazz clubs. It blew my mind. Those singers made me forget about everything else."

In 2010, he began sketching out the songs that would later deliver YouTube track From The Jazz We Come. A deal with Sony RCA followed, with his debut album set for release later this year.

"From top to bottom the album's a story." he says. "It was inspired by the Dapper Rebels, a group of kids in '60s LA. I made up a character who was part of the scene and documented a year of his life."

Brimming with Northern soul hooks, sashaying vocals and dusty drum breaks, Tiggs's music is already having an impact. Recently released single Run was used in an ad campaign for the 2015 Rugby World Cup, while Georgia earned him a call-up to the studios of Later... With Jools Holland.

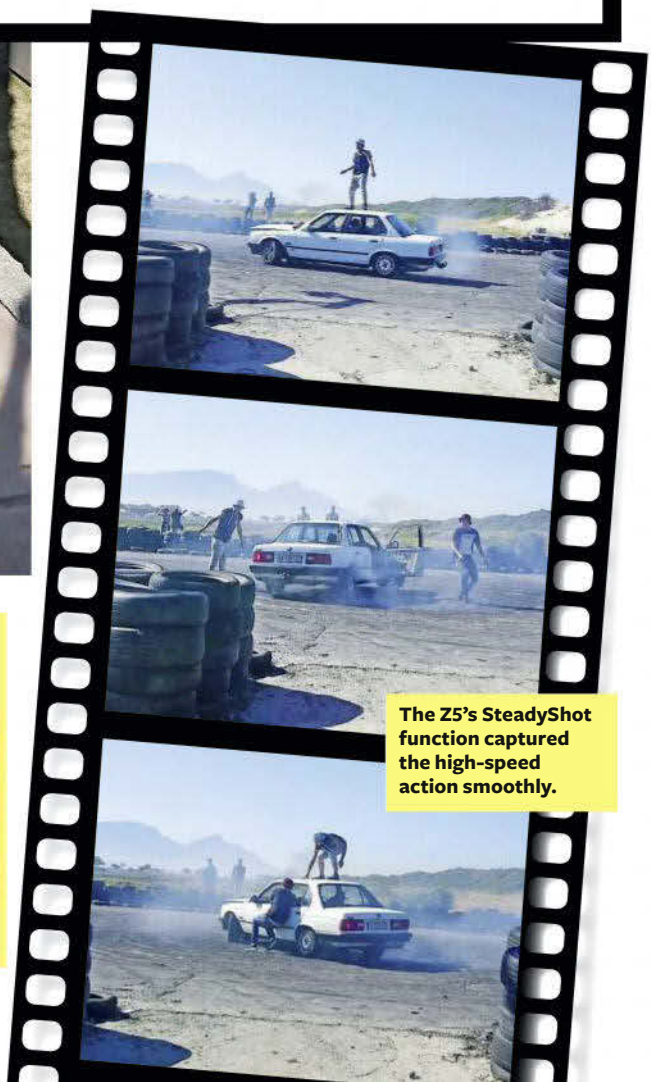
"Tom Jones was in the crowd," he says. "Bloody hell, no pressure. Did I get him into it? Of course I did!"

Currently rooted in two continents, Tiggs's songwriting is set to project him even further. Not even the cold can trouble him this time.

dawn-to-dusk schedule of the video shoot could throw at us.

With Sony's SteadyShot video function, it meant that we could capture the most extreme moments of spinning (see right) so smoothly and free of jolts and shudders that there's no way you'll have known that we were quaking in our shoes at the thought of being asked to get in – or on top – of one of the cars ourselves.

In fact, looking at the final results here, we reckon we could have done an exemplary job of shooting the whole video ourselves.



The Z5's SteadyShot function captured the high-speed action smoothly.

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SUKITA

DAVID BOWIE ALBUM BY ALBUM

We had almost completed work on our David Bowie retrospective when the shocking news of his death from cancer grimly greeted the dawn of 11 January. Our original mission was to tell the story behind each of his albums, designed to lend context and perspective to his latest – and last – recording, the magnificent Blackstar. While we proceeded to add and adjust some pieces accordingly, a detailed map of all his recorded output seemed a fitting epitaph. Because that's what will remain after we are all dust: Bowie's era-defining, genre-straddling, imitation-defying back catalogue. While the world mourns one of its brightest lights going out, David Bowie's immortality is assured by the music he left behind for us all. Not only did he design our lives. He offered something for future generations to aim for as well. TED KESSLER »

DAVID BOWIE

8 JANUARY, 1947 – 10 JANUARY, 2016

In 1987, David Bowie held a press conference in central London and in his opening seven words managed to outrage, amuse and (in the case of some weeds) appal the expectant British press. "'Allo," he chirped, sauntering centre-stage. "I'm David Bowie. And you're not." You couldn't get away with that unless you truly were, as Iggy Pop described him on 11 January, "the best". But he did, fearlessly audacious even in promoting his creative nadir, Never Let Me Down.

I was a primary school kid in the mid-'70s and thought then that David Bowie was spooky old music for adults. Shaped as I was by the post-punk eruption in 1979, I believed the most meaningful thing he'd done was resurrect Iggy Pop, my then-greatest new hero, having rescued the fallen Stooge and fellow ET, from rehab. (Soon, Bowie would also teach the incorrigible American madman to ski.) Now we know, of course, Bowie's were the bony shoulders on which every one of the post-punk upstarts stood, the freakiest one-man show who surely invented punk in the first place, possibly during the half-hour he appeared on The Russell Harty Show in 1975. There he was, incarcerated inside a boxy TV, beaming fluorescent golden hair, wonky teeth and withering aloofness, as teenage Britain gawped, transfixed – and gasped, "What the fuck is that!?", and then dyed its hair and started a revolutionary band, overnight.

Bowie was the weirdo's weirdo, a working-class weirdo, emerging like a gigantic crimson butterfly across the early-'70s landscape of croaking stinky-boy pub band pterodactyls. He was hazardously thin and hypnotically beautiful, an often disturbing, sexually ambiguous, drug-addicted performance artist who found an almost laughable cultural reach. His death was accompanied by tributes, not only from fellow artistes, but Arsène Wenger, the Archbishop Of Canterbury and an English astronaut in space.

Bowie knew, instinctively, as pop's first and definitive alien, that we're all weirdos on the inside, often lonely and insane, who reassured us all in Rock 'n' Roll Suicide "you're not alone... you're wonderful... gimme your hands!" Even before he died, he was already living forever, at the atomic level in the immortal nature of art. Now, he's pop's very own North Star, the fixed point around which the whole sky turns, the cultural compass by which you can always find your way to the truth of whoever you are.

Up on London's Hampstead Heath there's a landscaped public garden featuring a park bench memorial for a woman who died at around 35. It's positioned to look over stunning scenes of trees and rolling heath, and inscribed with two lyrical lines from supposedly trivial pop music: "Now she walks through her sunken dream/To the seat with the clearest view." It doesn't say Life On Mars? or David Bowie because it doesn't have to. "Oh, I'll be free," begins the very last line from his very last single, the wryly-titled Lazarus, as his performance artist persona creeps back inside his beloved wardrobe. "Ain't that just like me?" he adds, finally reminding us, because we need reminding, what the greatest pop music has always been about, and what David Bowie will always be about: freedom. *SYLVIA PATTERSON*

JIMMY KING

"Pop's very own North Star": David Bowie bids us adieu.

EVEN BEFORE HE DIED, HE WAS ALREADY LIVING FOREVER, AT THE ATOMIC LEVEL IN THE IMMORTAL NATURE OF ART.

1967-69

DAVID BOWIE (1967) DAVID BOWIE (1969)

Identity crises: the modish young Davie Jones casts around for a sound of his own.

Legend has it absolutely right: David Bowie's early career was far from auspicious. Based in Beckenham, in suburban South-East London, the mid-teen David Robert Jones was driven by a naked ambition to succeed in pop, but in actual musical terms, he was nowhere near the mark until 1969's Space Oddity gave him his first hit, aged 22.

Along the way, he went through half a dozen different bands, and rubbed shoulders with most of Swinging London's ace faces – one rehearsal almost landed him the gig singing in the Small Faces. Yet his early singles – and, indeed, 1967's self-titled debut album – were so variable as to be united by just one quality: crap-ness.

"I wasn't one of those people who came dancing out of the womb, like Marc Bolan," Bowie reflected much later in life, once his own status as pop's master chameleon was assured. In those formative years, the two aspiring idols shared a manager, but Bowie was always bitterly jealous of Bolan's manifest abilities. "I was stumbling around," he confessed. "I had no natural talents whatsoever, and the only way I could learn was to see how other people did it."

Before his initial sequence of irritatingly trite singles for Pye, even young Davie Jones's name was too like someone else's – Mancunian actor Davy Jones had just landed the singer role in US TV series, The Monkees – forcing him to change it. Those first 45s peddled a wooden, grooveless beat-pop, which spurned any trace of its roots in R&B. By all accounts, the newly rechristened Bowie only got as far as the studio thanks to his charm, good looks and indefatigable energy as a networker – both social, and sexual.

By the time he cut 1967's David Bowie for Deram, he was plainly in thrall to Ray Davies, with a bonus splurge of kitsch referencing: opener Uncle Arthur presents a character portrait of a 32-year-old comic reader, who prefers the comfort of his mum's cooking to growing up, while Love You Till Tuesday was, melodically, just Dedicated Follower Of Fashion without the oomph, or the savvy, featuring instead a cringe-making rhyme of "branch" with "rom-arnce".

At the same time, Bowie was trying on a plethora of other styles, such as music hall, and a more theatrical songcraft inspired by Anthony Newley, the turn-of-the-'60s crooner, whose Hackney-tinged voice influenced Bowie's "mockney" delivery. Join The Gang also hints at the druggy transcendence of Syd Barrett's Pink Floyd, but Bowie didn't excel in this direction – or any of the others – because he was peripheral to it, uncommitted. He came across as a chancer, not a chameleon.

One biographer brilliantly defined this first album's place in its creator's oeuvre as "the vinyl equivalent of the madwoman in the attic". Released on the same day as The Beatles' Sgt Pepper, whose whimsical themes were far more cogently expressed, it deservedly flopped. Not included on the album, The Laughing Gnome, with its helium voices and preposterous pseudo-trippiness, also sank without trace, first time around.

Wounded, Bowie recoiled from the fast-moving world of pop, and fell in with a performance-art crowd, who had a massive bearing on his later ideas. Famously, he had an affair with dancer and mime artist Lindsay Kemp, taking the role of Cloud in their collaborative production Pierrot In Turquoise.

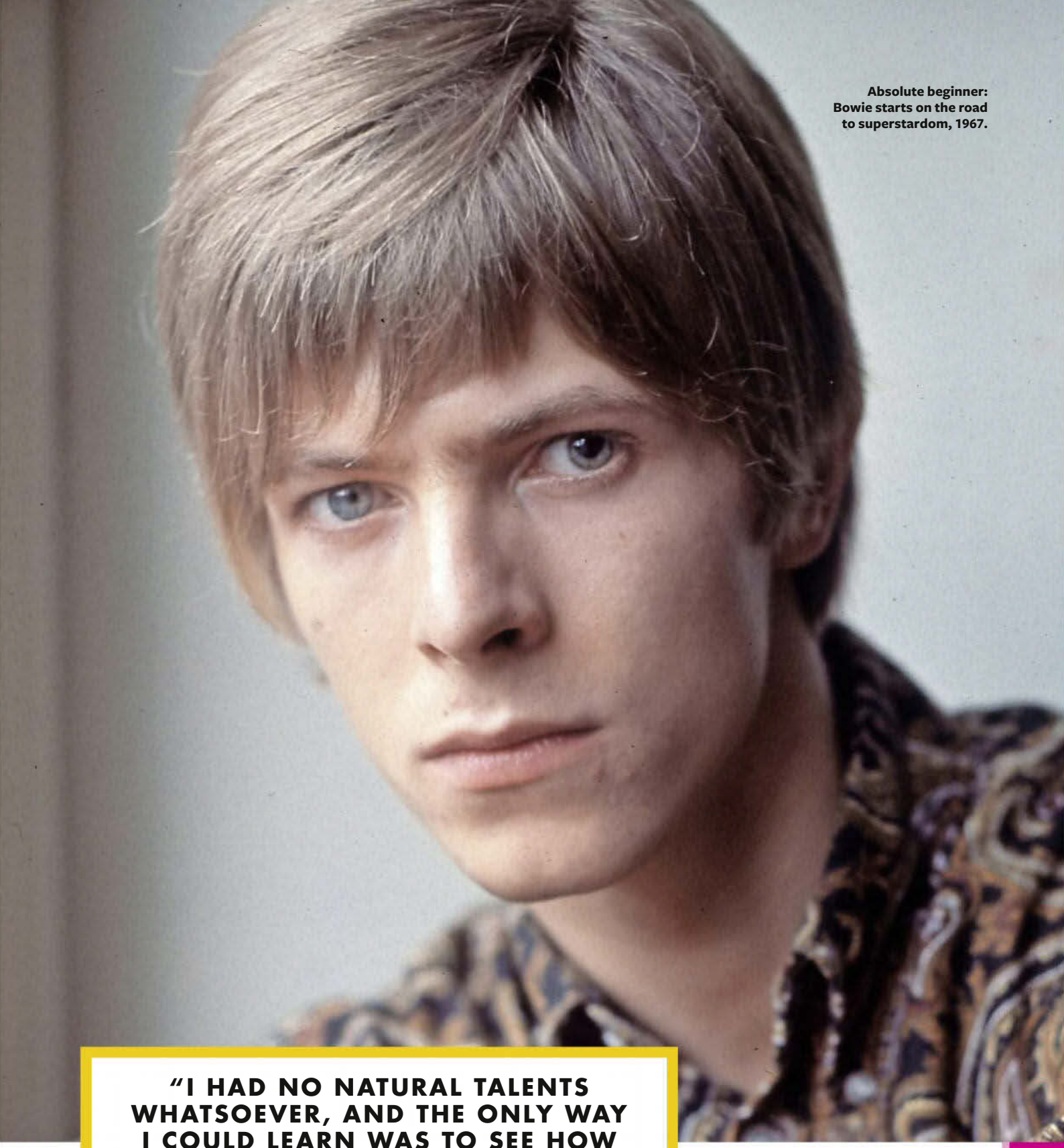
Bowie's dabblings through 1968 were myriad: filming a role in the movie, The Virgin Soldiers; Buddhist meditation; UFO-summoning sessions on Hampstead Heath; a wispy multimedia trio called Feathers, alongside his sophisticated new squeeze, Hermione Farthingale; and professional songwriting, which landed him a publishing deal, thus introducing him to a fledgling producer named Tony Visconti.

Circa December '68, watching Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey finally inspired him to write a song which wasn't a direct rip-off of someone else's, and which was culturally ahead of the game. Space Oddity was a revelation, the verses' dialogue between Earth and the marooned Major Tom bringing an unprecedented sense of drama to the humble pop song.

Bowie's pop prospects were rejuvenated, but it wasn't plain sailing: the single, released to coincide with Apollo 11's first moon landing in July '69, initially fell foul of an underwhelming promotional campaign from his new label, Mercury/Philips. Stateside, it stiffed as America preferred not to imagine its astronauts lost forever in deep space, but a new president at Philips UK rescued it from oblivion and gave it a big push into the Top 5.

(Top left) The debut album; (below left) his Space Oddity-featuring second.

ALAMY



Absolute beginner: Bowie starts on the road to superstardom, 1967.

"I HAD NO NATURAL TALENTS WHATSOEVER, AND THE ONLY WAY I COULD LEARN WAS TO SEE HOW OTHER PEOPLE DID IT."

Through all that, sessions for Bowie's second album – also self-titled, presumably because no-one had even heard of the first one – were a stop-start affair (the album was later re-released in 1972 as Space Oddity). They were luminously helmed by Visconti, using a cut-rate electric band he'd worked with, called Junior's Eyes. Mostly hooked around Bowie's rattling acoustic strum, it palpably had a greater self-assurance about it.

The better songs were remarkable. Letter To Hermione felt intimate and unaffected, a world away from Love You Till Tuesday. The rambling Cygnet Committee offered a postmodernly comment on hippiedom – the Bowie we know, hollering passionately about the spiritual nub of things.

The album's most personal moment came on the closing Memory Of A Free Festival, about a Beckenham knees-up he'd performed at that August, just a few days after his father passed away. Its wonderful outro – "the sun machine is going down, and we're gonna have a par-daaayy" – announced the hippy dream's bittersweet twilight, but also the dawning of an outright pop genius. At last, Bowie was out of the womb. *ANDREW PERRY*

1970-71

THE MAN WHO SOLD THE WORLD (1970)
HUNKY DORY (1971)

Two commercial misfires, but symptoms of the mania to come.

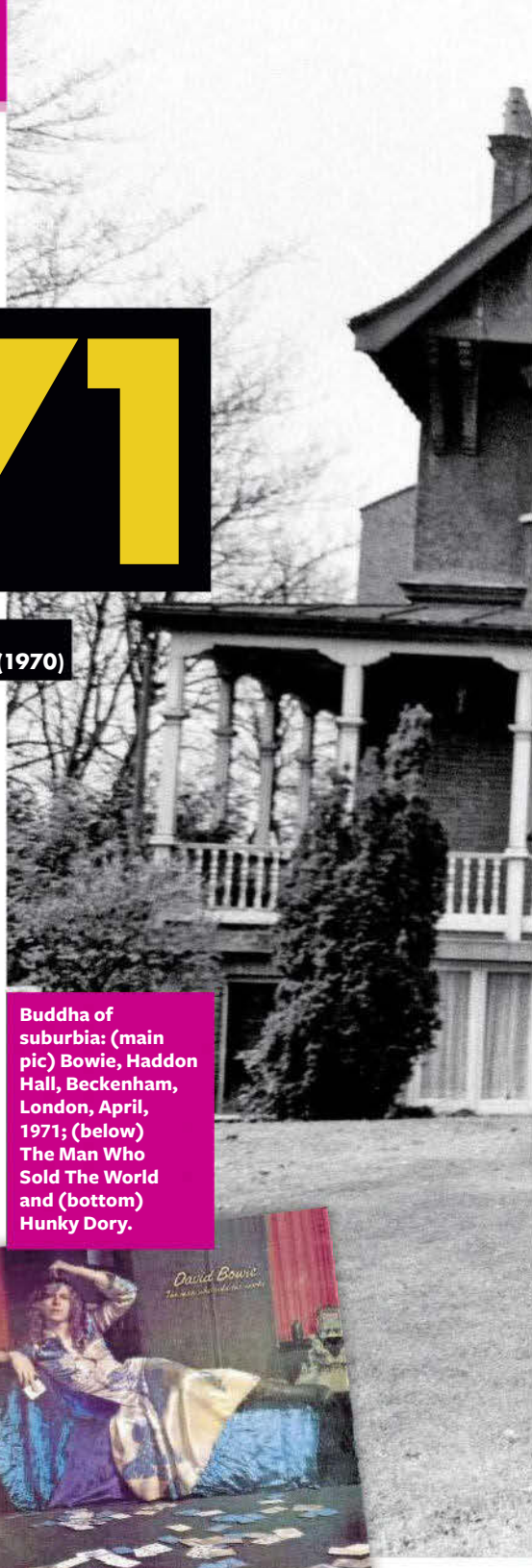
At the start of the '70s, it looked as if David Bowie's career was destined to be pieced together from false starts and stalled beginnings. The music hall whimsy of his self-titled 1967 debut hadn't worked out, and although his, also eponymous, second album had featured Space Oddity, which became a Number 5 hit in the UK in 1969, subsequent singles had stalled. There is a sense it wasn't yet quite clear – even to him – exactly what he was for in this strange post-hippy hinterland.

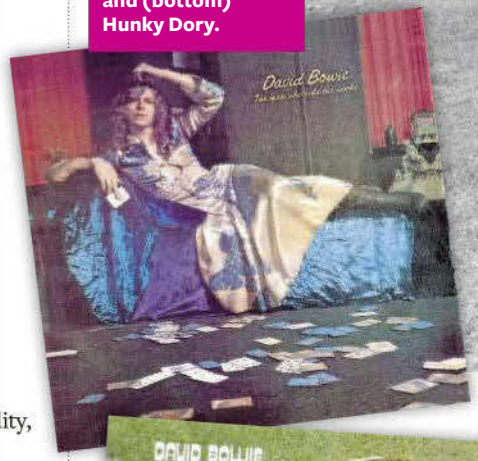
Even by the standards of an artist defined by restless reinvention, then, The Man Who Sold The World is a transitional record, a step away from past memories of free festivals but not quite a great leap forward into the future. Bowie's "domestic" life was in a state of flux itself at the time, too. He had recently moved into Haddon Hall, a grand, supposedly haunted Victorian house in Beckenham, where he lived out bohemian rock star fantasies with his partner in flamboyance, the former Angie Barnett, and housemates including producer Tony Visconti and members of Hype, the proto-Spiders From Mars. The recently married Bowie was, according to Visconti, enjoying this literal honeymoon period, his and Angie's state of unconventional wedded bliss a frequent distraction from record-making. Bowie would often leave his lyrics until the last minute, upsetting the budget-controlling, deadline-watching producer, yet flattering his own concept of off-the-cuff creativity.

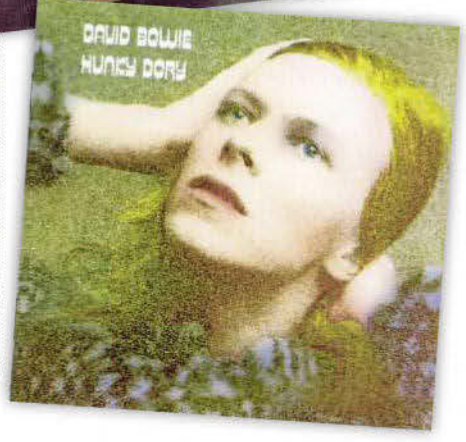
Yet if Bowie was seemingly treating The Man Who Sold The World lightly, the results are strikingly heavy. He might be in ethereal drag on the sleeve – a "man's dress" created by designer of the moment Mr Fish – but it's not an image that reflects the meaty heft of the record's contents. The Man Who Sold The World has been heralded as the avatar of glam-rock – even if Bowie was deliberately copying Marc Bolan on the goatish bleat of Black Country Rock – but it also shares territory with hard rock and heavy metal. The riff to The Supermen was apparently given to the singer by Jimmy Page (a curious contrast with Bowie's thin arts-lab snarl), while The Width Of A Circle's Luciferian sex rites are very much grotesque horrors from the proto-metal mindscape.

The sound's weight swings partly from guitarist Mick Ronson's expert dynamics, partly Visconti and Bowie's interest in synthesizers, the pair's lack of expertise forcing them to draft in unlikely record company executive Ralph Mace on Moog. Yet there are songs here just as haunted as Haddon Hall, portents of music yet to come. All The Madmen, a fractured examination of sanity inspired by his half-brother Terry Burns, foreshadows both The Bewlay Brothers, Hunky Dory's astonishing trip through the mind's outer limits, and Bowie's own practical experiments in identity. The album's chilling title track describes another dissociative state, another split personality, another mystery foretold.

The Man Who Sold The World was another commercial misfire. Ronson returned home to Hull to work as a gardener, Visconti headed off to work with Bolan, while Bowie enjoyed an interlude writing songs for other people – including Herman's Hermit Peter Noone, who would have a hit with Oh! You Pretty Things. More precariously, the follow-up, Hunky Dory, was written out of contract – it has been suggested that this is why it's not such a deliberately wild ride as its predecessor. Still, it's a good sign that Bowie

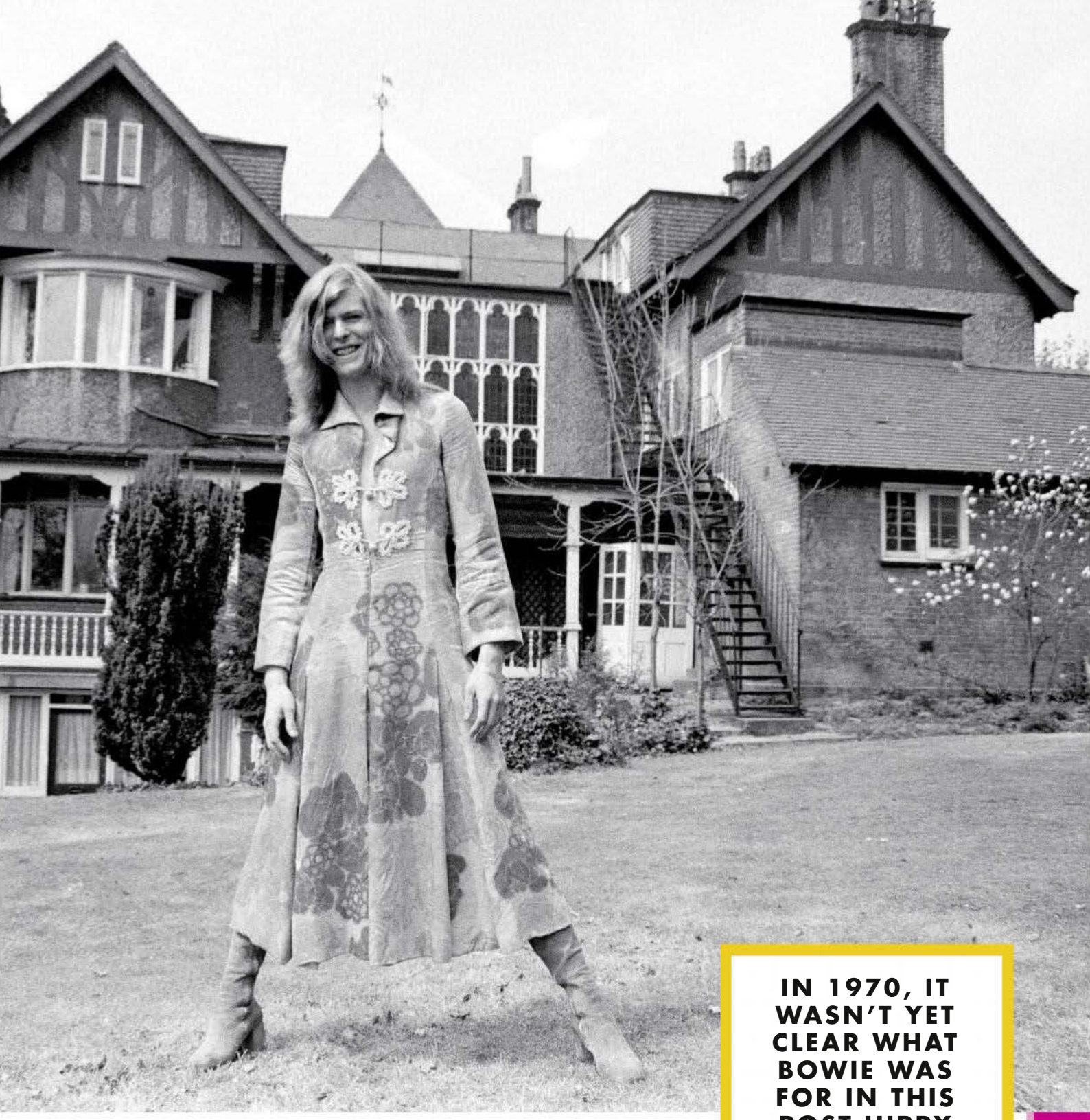






Buddha of suburbia: (main pic) Bowie, Haddon Hall, Beckenham, London, April, 1971; (below) The Man Who Sold The World and (bottom) Hunky Dory.

MIRRORPIX



IN 1970, IT WASN'T YET CLEAR WHAT BOWIE WAS FOR IN THIS POST-HIPPY HINTERLAND.

aces the sleeve androgyny, inspired by a book of Marlene Dietrich photographs. From the outset, it looks like something assured and beautiful, and it is. Dietrich isn't the only idol here: shortly before his lightning-flash would make him an icon in his own right, Bowie seems to be studying their rarefied worlds, collecting their images in ritual style. Song For Bob Dylan is an ambivalent tribute to an old-school hero, while Andy Warhol turns the instantly recognisable pop artist into Bowie's own creation, capturing the canvas-flat boredom of The Factory's New York. There are more covert tributes, too: Queen Bitch affects the claws-out attitude of Lou Reed and coterie, while Life On Mars? deliberately lifts My Way, a bitter little reference to the fact that Bowie had previously competed to write lyrics for the tune and lost to Paul Anka.

Recorded with Ronson, bassist Trevor Bolder and drummer Woody Woodmansey – the future Spiders From Mars – the record was produced, according to the sleeve by "Ken Scott (assisted by The Actor)". Despite the sweetness of Kooks, a song written for his newborn son Zowie, Bowie increasingly saw himself as mercurial changeling, screen dream. It was fitting, then, that Changes became a future classic, but its host album only did well when Ziggy Stardust threw oil on its fading embers. Some insist that The Man Who Sold The World was where Bowie's career started to coalesce; others argue Hunky Dory was the launchpad. Both, though, stand alone, as well as being symptoms of the full-blown fame and mania to come. Both come with a clear warning: look out, you rock'n'rollers. *VICTORIA SEGAL*

1947-2016 DAVID BOWIE ALBUM BY ALBUM

1972-73

THE RISE AND FALL OF ZIGGY STARDUST AND THE SPIDERS FROM MARS (1972) ALADDIN SANE (1973)

Ziggy Stardust launches Bowie into space, but it takes Aladdin Sane to keep him there.

On 23 January, 1971, David Bowie boarded a plane for his first ever visit to America. He left England a 24-year-old one-hit wonder, having spent the last year trying, and failing, to build on his only Top 10 single to date, Space Oddity. Four weeks later he returned home musically reborn, vibrating with an audacious brainwave of how he could finally conquer British pop for good.

The blindingly obvious solution had been staring him in the face all this time. To become bigger than Space Oddity he'd simply have to revisit the same source, Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey. Beneath its sensually overwhelming sci-fi veneer, the emotional crux of Kubrick's film posed a profound question about humanity's loneliness in the universe. "Is there anything out there?" All Bowie had to do was follow its muse back into outer space, only this time not as a helpless astronaut. His new masterplan: to be some *thing* out *there*.

Ziggy Stardust, the extra-terrestrial prophet who made Bowie a superstar, was officially christened in the airspace above the coast of California during that same US trip to promote his third album, The Man Who Sold The World. Still to record Hunky Dory, the Hadron Collider of Bowie's imagination was already thinking two records ahead.

The actual genesis of Ziggy had been brewing in his subconscious much longer still. The full list of the Starman's possible godparents is vast, from the subtler influences of Syd Barrett and Andy Warhol to the strictly visual impact of Japanese kabuki theatre and Kubrick's A Clockwork Orange. Muddying the waters further are Bowie's coy retroactive red herrings that its catalysts were William Burroughs's The Wild Boys, a book he almost certainly never read at the time, and a tailor's named "Ziggy" he once saw from a train.

In truth, it wasn't a tailor but a Taylor who provided the first Frankenstein stitches of Ziggy Stardust. Minor British rock'n'roll star Vince Taylor, whose tragic experiments with LSD ended in career sabotage after announcing to an audience in Paris that he was now somebody called "Mateus" and, furthermore, "the Son of God". The teenage Bowie met Taylor shortly after his Parisian meltdown in a Denmark Street café, indulging his madness for a whole afternoon of conspiracy gibberish. By rush hour, drug-addled master and eager apprentice were sat together on the pavement outside Tottenham Court Road Tube station inspecting the delusional rocker's map of secret UFO landing sites. "He was out of his gourd," Bowie recalled. "The guy was not playing with a full deck at all."

Taylor's space-crazed-pop-star-with-a-messiah-complex provided the basic Ziggy skeleton, but it wasn't until that fateful solo US trip of early '71 that a chain reaction of events applied his muscle and blood.

The first was an embarrassing case of mistaken identity after seeing The Velvet Underground live in New York's East Village. Unaware that Lou Reed had left the band, Bowie spent 15 minutes backstage complimenting his vocal surrogate, Doug Yule, on Reed's songwriting genius. "Er, look, buddy," Yule eventually cracked, "I'm not Lou Reed." Though mortified, Bowie managed to draw comic stimulus from his gaff, fuelling a long-standing obsession with performance, pretence and play acting. As he'd first told a journalist back in the mid-'60s, "I'd like to do character parts. I think it takes a lot to become somebody else."

Five days after meeting the wrong Lou Reed, Bowie visited the Chicago offices of Mercury Records where he told press officer Ron Oberman how he particularly enjoyed "listening to weird shit". Oberman's response was to rummage in a drawer, announce "this is the weirdest shit we've got" and hand him some singles by The Legendary Stardust Cowboy: a tone-deaf Texan eccentric born Norman Odam whose berserk rock'n'roll was »

We have lift-off: Ziggy Stardust (above) and Aladdin Sane (right).

EMI ARCHIVES

"I WAS BLURRING THE LINES BETWEEN SANITY AND AN INSANE FIGURE."

Star man: Bowie takes things to the next level as Ziggy, 1972.

All the young dudes: (from left) Bowie and new friends, Iggy Pop and Lou Reed, The Dorchester, London, 1972.

fascinating, if borderline unlistenable. Bowie agreed: this was weird shit indeed. But in both Odam's stellar pseudonym and the eerie space ballad I Took A Trip On A Gemini Spaceship (eventually covered by Bowie on 2002's Heathen) he heard the birthing cries of Ziggy.

The labour pains grew more violent still during a radio interview the following week in San Jose, California. Journalist John Mendelsohn, there shadowing Bowie for a Rolling Stone feature, looked through the DJ's racks and spied a copy of The Stooges' 1969 debut album. Bowie confessed he'd never heard of them but read the back cover and picked out the funniest title to play on air. For three minutes and nine seconds I Wanna Be Your Dog pummelled his senses into dumbstruck bliss. On the drive back to his hotel, Mendelsohn regaled him with stories about The Stooges' frontman, a torso-slashing, crowd-surfing Dionysian lunatic calling himself "Iggy Pop". Bowie liked the sound of this Iggy a great deal. Especially the name.

The next afternoon, Saturday, 13 February 1971, Bowie savoured a solitary airborne hour on a flight from San Francisco to LA to reflect on his maiden American pilgrimage, now sadly coming to its end. He thought about his Yule/Reed mix-up and the intrigue of a fake stage persona. He thought, too, about The Legendary Stardust Cowboy and Iggy Pop, shuffling their identities together like a deck of cards until, by the time the plane was on its descent, he could call his new alter-ego by name. "Ziggy Stardust." A bisexual rock'n'roll Jesus from Mars.

HIS ALTER-EGO "ZIGGY STARDUST" WAS A BISEXUAL, ROCK'N'ROLL JESUS FROM MARS.

Now all he had to do was write him some songs.

The great myth about 1972's The Rise And Fall Of Ziggy Stardust And The Spiders From Mars is that it's a "concept album". It isn't. The concept was Ziggy, the character, while the album was merely a vague shooting script allowing its author to become Ziggy, onstage and in public, for real. "It's not a story," Bowie confirmed at the time. "Just a few little scenes from the life of a band called Ziggy Stardust And The Spiders From Mars who could feasibly be the last band on Earth."

Recorded back to back with Hunky Dory, in the same Soho studio, Trident, with the same co-producer, Ken Scott, and the same East Yorkshire band of Mick Ronson, Trevor Bolder and Woody Woodmansey, musically the Ziggy album was Hunky Dory 2 in all but name. Strip away the umbrella sci-fi premise and the demarcation lines between both are near invisible, whether space-age balladry (Life On Mars?/Five Years), a Bromley boy's take on New York rock'n'roll (Queen Bitch/Suffragette City) or the obligatory cover (Ron Davies's It Ain't Easy, earmarked for Hunky

PHOTOSHOT, REX, EMI ARCHIVES

(Top) Comeback hit, Starman, from April, 1972; (left) with guitarist and Spider From Mars, Mick Ronson, 1972; (bottom) a lad insane, 1973.

Dory but held back for Ziggy). Yet the singular difference was all in the presentation.

The success of Ziggy Stardust was only ever 50 per cent about the music, even if it was as transcendent as Moonage Daydream or the unsurpassed masterpiece of star/fan communion Rock 'N' Roll Suicide. The rest was all in the droog-based wardrobe of designer friend Freddie Burretti (and, later, Kansai Yamamoto); the exception to the uncool mullet rule; "Red Hot Red" Schwarzkopf hair-dye; tailor-made wrestling boots by Russell & Bromley; and the outstanding feat of pop Pygmalion, transforming three blokes from Humberside into make-up wearing Martian dandies. When Bowie later quipped, "It was just the songs and the trousers, that's what sold Ziggy," he wasn't being flippant.

It was while dutifully promoting Hunky Dory in the first weeks of 1972 that Bowie unveiled Ziggy in all his cushioned-codpiece glory to journalists, simultaneously dropping their jaws with his announcement, "I'm gay and always have been." For his new label, RCA, such media teasing was much less a concern than the proposed running order of the finished Ziggy LP itself, waylaid with one too many covers, including Chuck Berry's Round And Round, a teenage favourite Bowie had chosen as, "the kind of number Ziggy would have done onstage".

Equally worrying, it still lacked an obvious radio hit. Bowie nobly acquiesced, replacing the Berry standard with a last-minute written-to-order single candidate. The lyrics boiled down the Ziggy concept in nursery rhyme miniature: "There's a Starman/ Waiting in the sky." Its chorus melody was just as basic, a wholesale rip-off of Judy Garland's Over The Rainbow from The Wizard Of Oz. So simple, RCA could have been forgiven for thinking he was taking the piss.

Five weeks ahead of the album, Starman was released on 28 April. With the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards Band currently holding the Number 1 spot to ransom with Amazing Grace, the nation's kids were in dire need of interplanetary assistance. It took another two months before Ziggy's fanfare finally crashed inside the Top 30, prompting Bowie's blessed prime-time invasion of Top Of The Pops on 6 July. Beaming down into several million British living rooms, the alien had landed to come for their children. If recent history has proven anything it's that in the influence of that single broadcast upon the next 40 years of pop culture, from music to fashion to Danny Boyle's 2012 Olympics opening ceremony, the class of '72 couldn't boogie into submission quick enough.

Buoyed by Starman, the Ziggy album achieved Bowie's objective in ending the curse of Space Oddity's one-hit wonder. Yet for all its transparent debt to outsider American rock'n'roll ("You're not going to like it," he'd warned Ken Scott, "it's much more like Iggy Pop"), Ziggy was still a fundamentally London record: between its Heddon Street cover shot, Trident studios and La Gioconda, the café where the young Bowie first met Vince Taylor, its heartland occupied barely a half-mile walk through Soho.

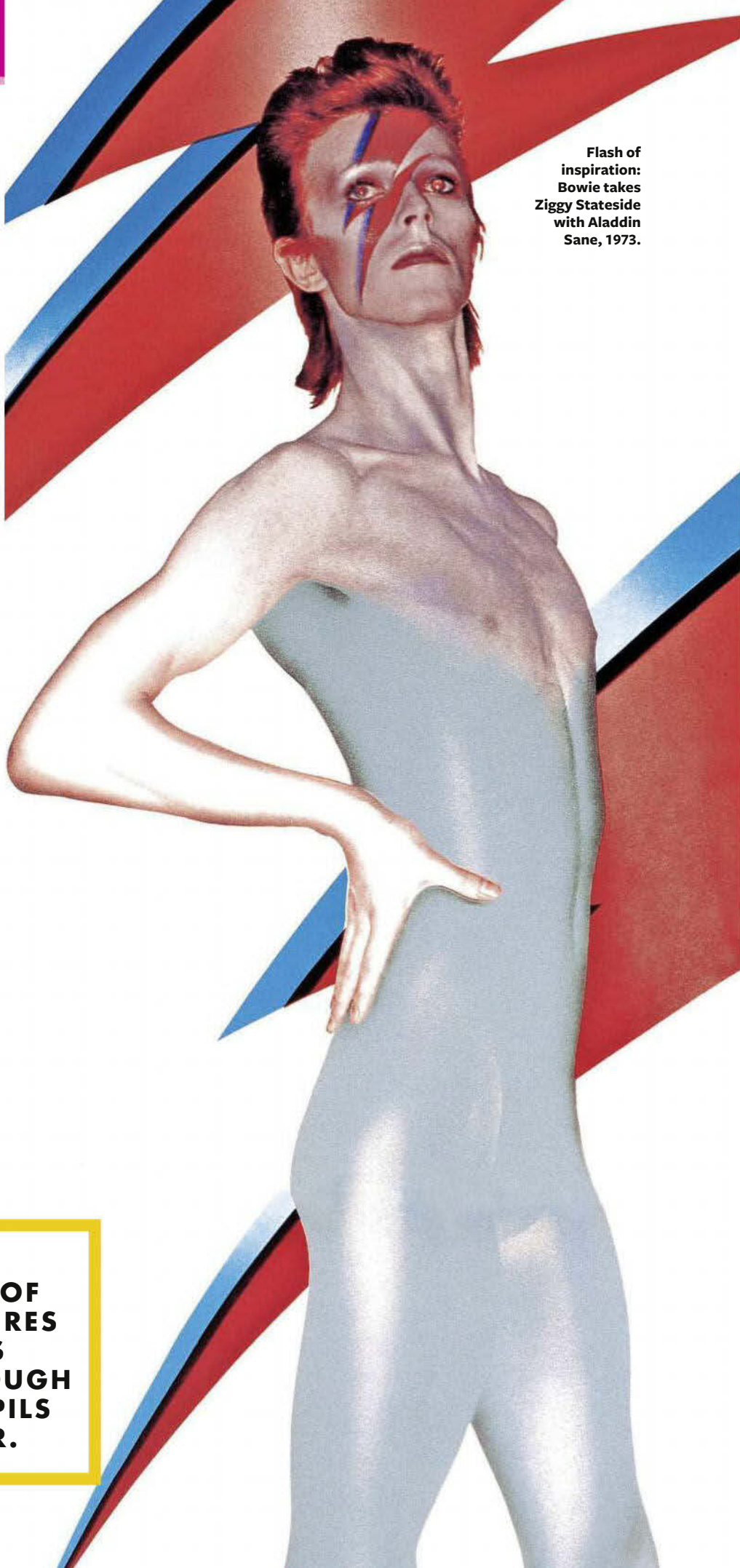
His next album, though still predominantly made in London, was an altogether foreign affair. Louder, harder, dirtier, sexier and quite literally crazier, it told the story of Ziggy's adventures in America as experienced through the dilating, different-sized pupils of his creator. In the process it made Bowie the biggest pop star in Britain, albeit at no »

small cost to his mental health. The clue being in its title: Aladdin Sane. "Ziggy served my purpose because I found it easier to function through him," Bowie reflected in 1993. "Although I put myself on a path of pure psychological damage by doing what I did. But it felt like it was going to be easier living through an alternative self. Of course, the problem was that I was blurring the lines between sanity and an insane figure."

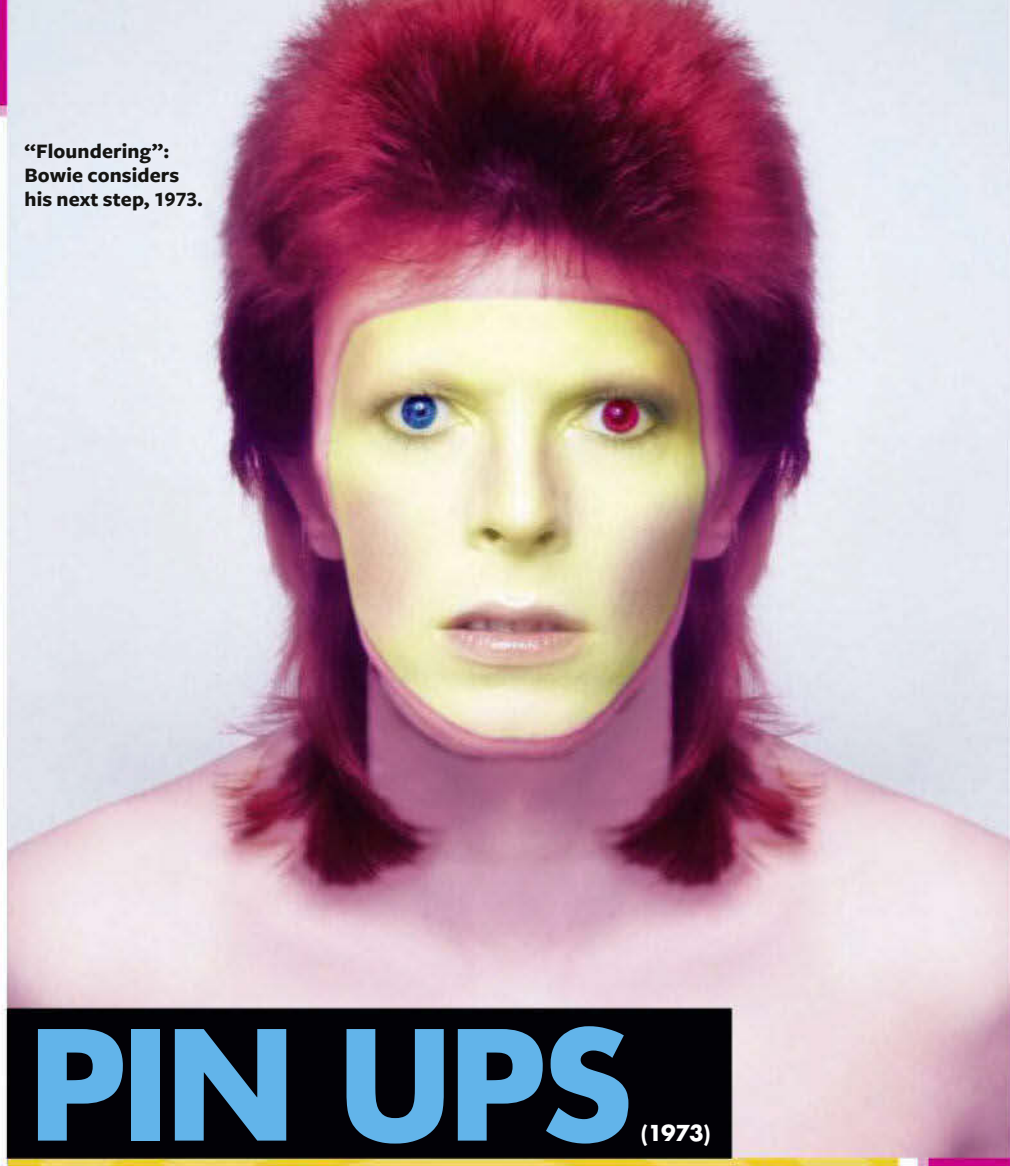
The price of his sanity was, at the very least, a far superior album to its predecessor in terms of cosmic pop awe. Bowie agreed, naming Aladdin Sane "the more successful" of the two, "because it's more informed about rock'n'roll than Ziggy was." The difference between both is best measured in their title tracks. The song Ziggy Stardust is bold, melodic early-'70s glam rock. Whereas Aladdin Sane (1913-1938-197?) beams from a ghostly cocktail lounge in another dimension: a song unlike anything else of its time, or even of its planet. Crucial to its otherness was the addition of new Spiders' pianist Mike Garson, revelling in the brief to embellish some avant-garde ivory insanity. The sound, perhaps, of the chaos now churning inside Bowie's head.

Aladdin Sane owes much of its urgency and nearly all its subject matter to Bowie's first full-scale tour of America with The Spiders From Mars in the autumn and winter of 1972. As a 12-year-old he'd first been introduced to Jack Kerouac's beat bible On The Road by his older half-brother, Terry, whose struggles with schizophrenia cast a shadow over his ongoing Ziggy identity crisis. Kerouac's book had already inspired a lyric in Ziggy's Five Years and would loom larger still over its follow-up: an equivalent Pan-American travelogue from New York (Watch That Man) to Michigan (Panic In Detroit) and Los Angeles (Cracked Actor) via an overnight sleeper train from Seattle to Phoenix (a journey prompting the dystopian doo-wop Drive-In Saturday).

ALADDIN SANE TOLD THE STORY OF ZIGGY'S ADVENTURES IN AMERICA AS EXPERIENCED THROUGH THE DILATING PUPILS OF HIS CREATOR.



Flash of inspiration: Bowie takes Ziggy Stateside with Aladdin Sane, 1973.



"Floundering": Bowie considers his next step, 1973.

Beside the persistent echoes of Lou Reed and Iggy Pop (both of whom he'd now not only met but agreed to produce) he added his latest Stateside rave, the New York Dolls, who offered him the hospitality of Kerouac's "frosty fagtown" in all its Lower East Side sleaze. Within days Bowie had stolen singer David Johansen's girlfriend Cyrinda Foxe, serenading her with The Jean Genie ("Talking 'bout Monroe/And walking on Snow White") and casting her in its video, shot on the streets of San Francisco. The Dolls also left their imprint on Time, the song that finally matched the breathtaking theatricality of the Ziggy stage show on record, with Bowie lamenting the tragic death of drummer Billy Murcia who'd since died at a party in London. "In Quaaludes and red wine."

Finishing the tour in early December, at a farewell press conference Bowie confessed that having now travelled the breadth of the country he believed "the American is the loneliest person in the world."

Sailing home from New York aboard the R.H.M.S. Ellinis – an indulgent luxury he excused on account of his worsening fear of flying – among his luggage was an acoustic guitar and a copy of Vile Bodies, Evelyn Waugh's 1930 satire about London's rich and idle Bright Young Things caught between the two world wars. His parting thoughts on the United States of Isolation, Waugh's novel and the rolling Atlantic would rock Bowie's muse throughout the week-long voyage. When he disembarked in England four days before Christmas, now armed with its theme song, Aladdin Sane was complete.

On 3 July, 1973, not quite one year since that generation-changing Starman broadcast, Bowie "killed" Ziggy Stardust onstage at London's Hammersmith Odeon while Aladdin Sane was still Number 1. By the year's end it had outsold The Beatles' first posthumous Red and Blue compilations and Pink Floyd's The Dark Side Of The Moon to become the UK's biggest album of 1973. Its chart domination also yanked Bowie's back catalogue out of mothballs: Space Oddity (the now re-titled second LP), The Man Who Sold The World and Hunky Dory all hit their highest chart positions in Aladdin's intoxicating riptide.

It took the Ziggy Stardust LP to launch Bowie into space, but the unstoppable thrust of Aladdin Sane to keep him there – among the stars, out of reach and, as he'd freely admit with hindsight, out of his gourd. But what strange new worlds and personalities he'd discover while lost in orbit would soon become the most thrilling evolution in pop history. Bowie's '70s odyssey had only just begun. *SIMON GODDARD*

GETTY; EMI ARCHIVES

PIN UPS (1973)

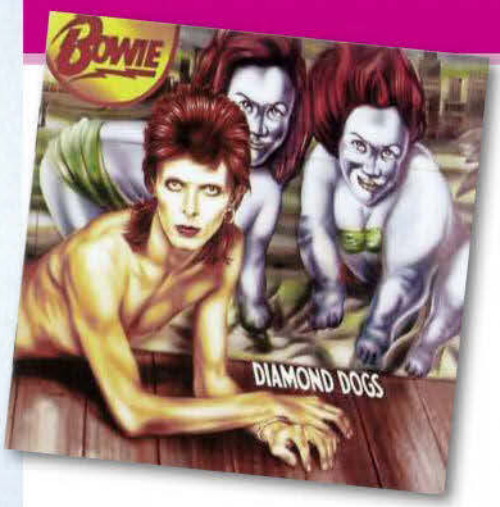
In need of cash, Bowie fires up a lacklustre covers album.

Most of the time, Bowie has a stand-offish relationship with the past, preferring to live in the present day, or better still, the future. But it was different in October 1973, when he released his albums of '60s covers, Pin Ups. Two months earlier, director George Lucas released American Graffiti, his movie homage to rock'n'roll culture. Nostalgia was in the air.

But the key factors in Bowie's decision to cut an album of Kinks, Who and Yardbirds covers were money and Bryan Ferry. His management company, MainMan, were skint and Bowie didn't want to be usurped by the Roxy Music vocalist who was also plotting a covers album. Pin Ups and Ferry's These Foolish Things appeared within days of each other.

In retrospect, the greatest thing about Pin Ups is Justin de Villeneuve's cover photo: a carrot-topped Bowie with an otherworldly-looking Twiggy resting her head on his shoulder. Bowie's hilariously mannered vocals on The Easybeats' Friday On My Mind recall his later rum cover of Across The Universe on Young Americans. His inherent Bowie-ness often overpowers other people's songs. Only his version of Liverpudlian beat poppers The Merseys' 1966 hit Sorrow shines, and gave him a deserved Number 3 UK hit. Bowie would cut some inspired obscure covers later (see: The Legendary Stardust Cowboy's I Took A Trip On A Gemini Spaceship in 2002). But while occasionally fun, on Pin Ups he sounds ike he's floundering. *MARK BLAKE*

"Hedonism contaminated by despair": Bowie in 1974; (far right) the same year's Diamond Dogs.



1974

DIAMOND DOGS (1974)

This million-dollar panic attack chimed perfectly with the age.

By late 1973, the world seemed to be catching up with David Bowie's apocalyptic jive. War in the Middle East. Scandal in the White House. Bombs in London. A military coup in Chile, with murmurings of more to come. Cities turning into warzones. Oil shortages turning out the lights. Newspaper editorials were no less doom-laden than Bowie's bleakest predictions.

Conceived in dark times, Diamond Dogs is a sick record: sick like disease and sick like a tasteless joke. Its shrill hysteria emanated from a brilliant mind that was overheating with bad news and cocaine. It sounded like an ending, one last mad hurrah before the great collapse. "Lou Reed and I are predicting the end of an era," Bowie said two years earlier. "And I mean that catastrophically." As he cries on the fantastically absurd opener Future Legend: "This ain't rock'n'roll! This is genocide!"

For Bowie, it really was the end of something. He was cutting ties with glam rock, The Spiders From Mars and producer Ken Scott, handling production and lead guitar himself. He was also looking forward. The Isaac Hayes strut of 1984 was a foretaste of Young Americans and the Thin White Duke, while Tony Visconti re-entered the fold to perfect the album's dense, demented Wall Of Sound. But the many fans who considered the album a crashing disappointment couldn't hear the future, only the wreckage left by the death of glam superhero Ziggy Stardust.

CONCEIVED IN DARK TIMES, DIAMOND DOGS IS A SICK RECORD.

Bowie later called Diamond Dogs "my usual basket of apocalyptic visions, isolation, being terribly miserable". Too distracted to make a proper concept album, he glued together discarded ideas in an ingenious salvage job. Bowie was working on a stage musical of George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four when Orwell's widow Sonia denied him permission, so he combined those songs with numbers from an abandoned Ziggy Stardust musical – Rebel Rebel and Rock 'N' Roll With Me are a star's abdication address – and new ones about the "diamond dogs", a tribe of marauding, roller-skating youths who dwell on rooftops in the disintegrating metropolis of Hunger City: Oliver Twist meets A Clockwork Orange. "I want to write about the cities that Ziggy comes from," Bowie said.

The resulting Frankenstein's monster is as grotesque as Guy Peellaert's sleeve artwork. Everything sounds off. Rebel Rebel's riff is claustrophobically relentless. The title track is The Rolling Stones at their most decadent with lyrics by William Burroughs and JG Ballard (Bowie adopted Burroughs's cut-up technique to create collages of images). Hedonism is contaminated by despair (and vice versa) and rock stars mutate into fascists. When Bowie sings, "I'm looking for a party" on 1984, he sounds like he means the sinister political kind. It's no surprise that pianist Mike Garson said the sessions at Olympic Studios "had a very heavy vibe". For the magnificent triptych Sweet Thing/ Candidate/Sweet Thing (Reprise), Bowie instructed drummer Tony Newman to play like a French drummer boy witnessing his first guillotining. With the final loop of Chant Of The Ever Circling Skeletal Family, it's as if the whole album is frozen with terror, trapped between anarchy and tyranny.

Diamond Dogs sounds like a million-dollar panic attack, an evil joke, a head overflowing with nightmares, rock'n'roll at the end of its tether and the scariest Broadway flop of all time. It was the album that 1974 deserved. *DORIAN LYNSKEY*

GETTY

"To cocaine!": Bowie pledges his allegiance in 1975.

1947-2016 DAVID BOWIE ALBUM BY ALBUM

1975-76

YOUNG AMERICANS (1975)
STATION TO STATION (1976)

Coked-up, souled-out: The Thin White Duke brings news from the inner cities and outer space.

On 2 November, 1974, David Bowie appeared on ABC-TV's Dick Cavett Show in New York. After performing 1984 and a new song Young Americans, complete with some wonderful bow-legged dance moves, he sat down to be interviewed by the host.

Bowie had clearly ingested a vast amount of cocaine. He was jittery, sniffed repeatedly and avoided eye contact, preferring to stare at his feet and trace patterns on the studio floor with the tip of his walking cane.

A few minutes into the exchange, Bowie reacted to one of Cavett's remarks by giggling breathlessly, cracking a rictus grin and offering America a brief glimpse of his cold, dead eyes. He looked truly disturbed and disturbing.

If this was Bowie shortly before what he called "My Los Angeles period – drugs, nervous collapse, very few genuine friends..." How bad did he get during it? But the problem with Bowie as an anti-drugs poster boy is that he did some of his best work while completely out to lunch. The proof: 1975's Young Americans and »

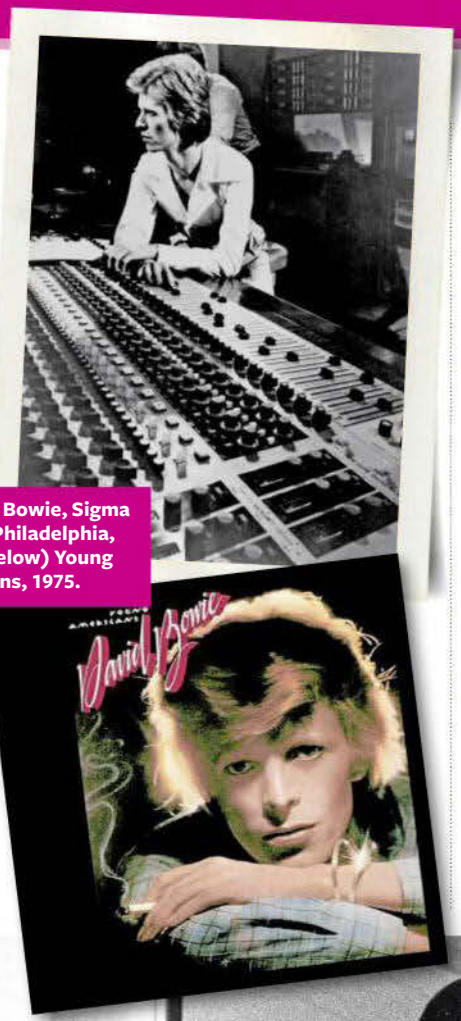
the following year's Station To Station.

Bowie's Dick Cavett Show appearance trailered the new music he'd been making in Philadelphia's Sigma Sound studios since August '74. Young Americans was Bowie's homage to R&B and soul, and a sharp left turn after Diamond Dogs' dystopian glam rock.

Pivotal to Bowie's new sound was Puerto Rican guitarist Carlos Alomar, who declared his new boss "the whitest man I've ever seen". Others making their Bowie album debut included his current girlfriend, catwalk model and backing singer Ava Cherry, and backing vocalist Luther Vandross.

The album's title track bubbled along on a joyful sax riff. Everything, from the clipped drumming to the piano runs, paid lip service to the "Philly soul" sound pioneered by producers Gamble And Huff. Everything, that is, except for Bowie, who delivered his lyrics about pimps, hustlers and Richard Nixon in an otherworldly drawl, like a Martian reading from The New York Times.

In his interview, Cavett told Bowie he considered him a "working actor". He was right. This new marmalade-haired soul boy with his baggy pants and walking cane was just another role. And Bowie was having fun with it.



(Above) Bowie, Sigma Sound, Philadelphia, 1974; (below) Young Americans, 1975.

Young Americans matched its creator's description of the album as "the definitive plastic soul record". Young Americans worked precisely because the music was a bit faked. On Right and the Luther Vandross co-write Fascination it was the push-and-pull between the self-confessed "white limey" and his "authentic" R&B musicians that made it so appealing. They brought the soul; Bowie brought news from another planet.

On the final day at Sigma, he allowed a group of fans camped outside into the studio to hear the album. Of course, they loved it. But its best track was yet to come.

Bowie flew to New York before Christmas '74 for some final recording sessions, and met up with John Lennon. Bowie told the Beatle he was including a version of Across The Universe on Young Americans. It was an

The stars are out tonight: Bowie with his Fame co-writer, John Lennon, the Grammys, LA, 1975.

(Left) Starring in The Man Who Fell To Earth; (above) Station To Station, 1976.

"I HONESTLY DON'T KNOW WHERE THE REAL DAVID JONES IS. I'VE GOT SO MANY SHELLS I'VE FORGOTTEN WHAT THE PEA LOOKS LIKE."

awful, mawkish version, but to reciprocate, Lennon dropped by The Hit Factory where Bowie was recording.

The Lennon/Bowie/Alomar co-write Fame came together during a lengthy jam with all three playing guitars. It was a song about money and loneliness, and was harsher, more brittle-sounding than anything else on Young Americans. But with a Beatle on board it was a hit single-in-waiting.

Released in March '75, the Young Americans album reached Number 2 in the UK and the Top 10 in the US. But it was Fame that gave Bowie his first US Number 1. And it was Fame that sounded like the beginning of his next album, Station To Station.

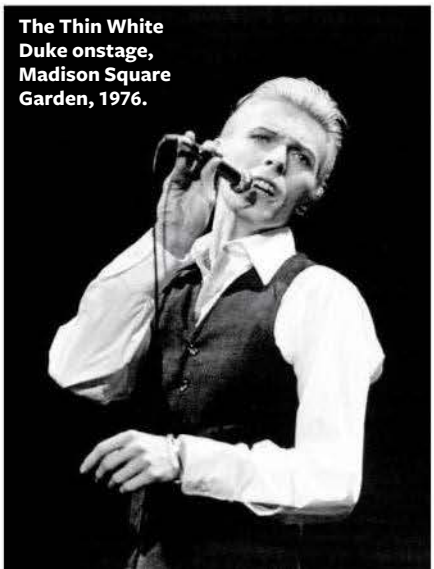
In early 1975, Bowie moved to Los Angeles and signed up to star in director Nicolas Roeg's sci-fi fantasy The Man Who Fell To Earth. The shoot was delayed, leaving Bowie to cocoon himself in various houses in Beverly Hills, all of which he believed to be haunted.

Hidden away in his eyrie, Bowie lived on a diet of pharmaceutical cocaine and milk, obsessed about evil spirits, white witches and UFO sightings, and read The Spear Of Destiny, a study of Hitler's fascination with the occult. When Rolling Stone's Cameron Crowe came to interview him, Bowie pulled down the blinds, mid-conversation, convinced he'd seen a body fall from the sky.

Bowie knew the value of a good act. Some also suggested his prodigious cocaine intake was part of an experiment; to see just how far he could go. Either way, Bowie was in a heightened state when he arrived at LA's Cherokee Studios in September to start recording Station To Station; an album he later claimed to have no memory of making.

Young Americans' love songs and "plastic soul" were last year's models. On Station To Station, TVC 15 was inspired by the night a befuddled Iggy Pop thought Bowie's television had "swallowed" his girlfriend, and the title track was driven by Carlos Alomar and Earl Slick's cranky guitar figure, over which Bowie crooned ambiguous lyrics partly inspired by occult magician Aleister Crowley's poetry book White Stains.

The song also name-checked his latest alter ego, "the Thin White Duke", "played" by Bowie on his next tour as a sort of ruined aristo-meets-cabaret singer in dapper white shirt and black waistcoat. It was Bowie's second acting role that year, after the humanoid alien Thomas Newton in The Man Who Fell To Earth. "I honestly don't know where the real David Jones is," he said in 1976. "It's like the shell game. Except I've got so many shells I've forgotten what the pea looks like."



The Thin White Duke onstage, Madison Square Garden, 1976.

In New York, John Lennon had been shocked by the amount of cocaine Bowie was taking. Yet, as his musicians testify, he could still function in the studio. "His vocals were perfectly sung," said Alomar. And he could still write a great pop song. There were several lighter moments on Station To Station alongside that foreboding title track. Golden Years was a soft funk-meets-doo-wop shuffle, which, according to Bowie legend, he offered to Elvis who turned it down. Elsewhere, Word On A Wing was a passionate prayer to some unspecified higher being, and a cover of the 1957 standard Wild Is The Wind, made famous by Nina Simone, saw Bowie striving to match her soulful performance.

Station To Station arrived in January 1976 and peaked at Number 3 in the US, even higher than it did in Britain. Golden Years later rewarded Bowie with another American Top 10 hit. But his love affair with the country was cooling off.

On 27 November, 1975, Bowie was interviewed by ITV chat show host Russell Harty, via a satellite link from LA. Bowie looked marginally healthier than he had a year earlier with Dick Cavett, and met Harty's excruciating questions ("What colour is your hair?") with weary froideur. When the host asked what he'd be wearing on his next tour, Bowie replied, "The image I may adopt will be me. I'm sort of inventing me at the moment."

Before long, Bowie would leave Los Angeles, and its cocaine, evil spirits and white witches, behind. The cold, mechanical thrum of Station To Station's title track had already signposted his next destination: Europe. Bowie would soon head to Paris and then Berlin to begin another chapter in his story.

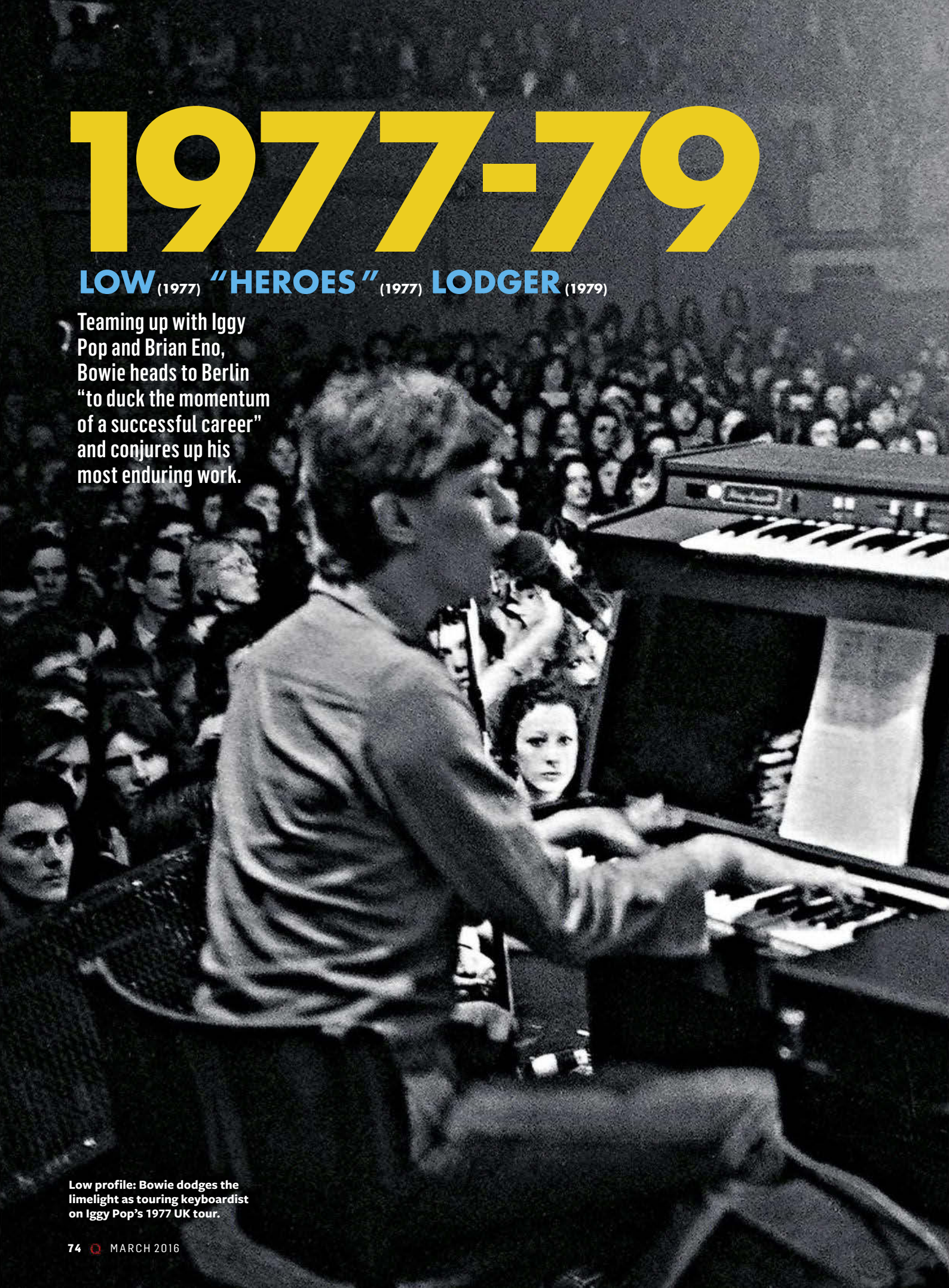
MARK BLAKE

GETTY, REX

1977-79

LOW (1977) "HEROES" (1977) LODGER (1979)

Teaming up with Iggy Pop and Brian Eno, Bowie heads to Berlin "to duck the momentum of a successful career" and conjures up his most enduring work.



Low profile: Bowie dodges the limelight as touring keyboardist on Iggy Pop's 1977 UK tour.

ANDREW KENT

1947-2016
DAVID BOWIE
ALBUM BY ALBUM

On the face of it, the hulking apartment block on Hauptstrasse does not exactly suggest the home of an internationally feted star. Located in the Schöneberg area of the old West Berlin, built next to a dual carriageway, and done out in a queasy shade of off-white, it's one of those urban buildings that seems to signify nothing much at all. Nothing, that is, unless you know your history, and the role number 155 played in the recuperation and reinvention – yet again – of David Bowie.

Starting in October 1976, Bowie lived here, at first with his personal assistant Coco Schwab and Iggy Pop, before the latter found another flat around the back of the same building. He was set on curing himself of the toxic effects of his time in Los Angeles – "the most vile piss-pot in the world," he reckoned – and finding new ways of living and working. "I'm becoming incredibly straight, level, assertive, moderate," he said in November 1977. "Very different from, say, two years ago."

Given that he was referring back to a period when he had apparently hoovered up the Gross Domestic Product of Latin America, lived on a diet of milk and fresh peppers, become fixated with the occult, and cultivated the image of a dandified skeleton, this was no bad thing. Indeed, he would later talk about his pre-Berlin days in terms of a narrow escape from death. After that, who wouldn't have lusted for the pleasures of a simple life, lived in near-anonymity?

But Bowie being Bowie, the story of »

his time in Berlin is that bit more colourful. His new artistic foil Brian Eno later recalled regularly returning to Haupstrasse at six o'clock in the morning after frantic recording sessions, and watching Bowie "break a raw egg into his mouth – and that was his food for the day, virtually." He went on: "It was really slummy. We'd sit around the kitchen table at dawn, feeling tired and a bit fed up – me with a bowl of some crummy German cereal, and him with albumen from the egg running down his shirt."

In the middle-distance, no end of intrigue bubbled away. There were altercations with drug dealers involving a crashed car, the attempted suicide of Bowie's estranged wife, his brief relationship with a transgender German cabaret star, and more. Moreover, contrary to the idea of a period of quiet retreat, Bowie frantically created new music – and, by 1978, he would be back on tour.

THERE WERE ALTERCATIONS WITH DEALERS, THE ATTEMPTED SUICIDE OF BOWIE'S ESTRANGED WIFE, HIS BRIEF RELATIONSHIP WITH A TRANSGENDER GERMAN CABARET STAR, AND MORE.

In the wake of the European shows that promoted Station To Station, there was a plan for Bowie to move into a new seven-bedroom house near Lake Geneva in Switzerland, with his wife Angie and their five-year-old son Zowie. The reasoning was partly bound up with a $300,000 tax bill, but the idea didn't last. Angie stayed put; Bowie was soon on his way to Berlin.

Looking back, some of the things that drew him there seem pretty clear. On the Station To Station tour, instead of a support act, there had been a screening of Luis Buñuel's surrealist short film, Un Chien Andalou, soundtracked by Kraftwerk's 1975 album Radio-Activity – an indication of his passion for the experimental music being made by a new generation of Germans, which blurred out into a consuming interest in so-called Krautrock, not least the pared-down, streamlined records released by the Dusseldorf duo Neu!.

When the same tour stopped for three nights in LA in February 1976, the painter David Hockney introduced Bowie to Christopher Isherwood, whose literary output had not only crystallised the legend of pre-war Berlin bohemia – the iconic musical Cabaret (turned into a 1972 film) was based on Isherwood's 1945 book The Berlin Stories – but also embodied the seductive idea of a footloose Englishman taking inspiration from the city's bohemian wonders.

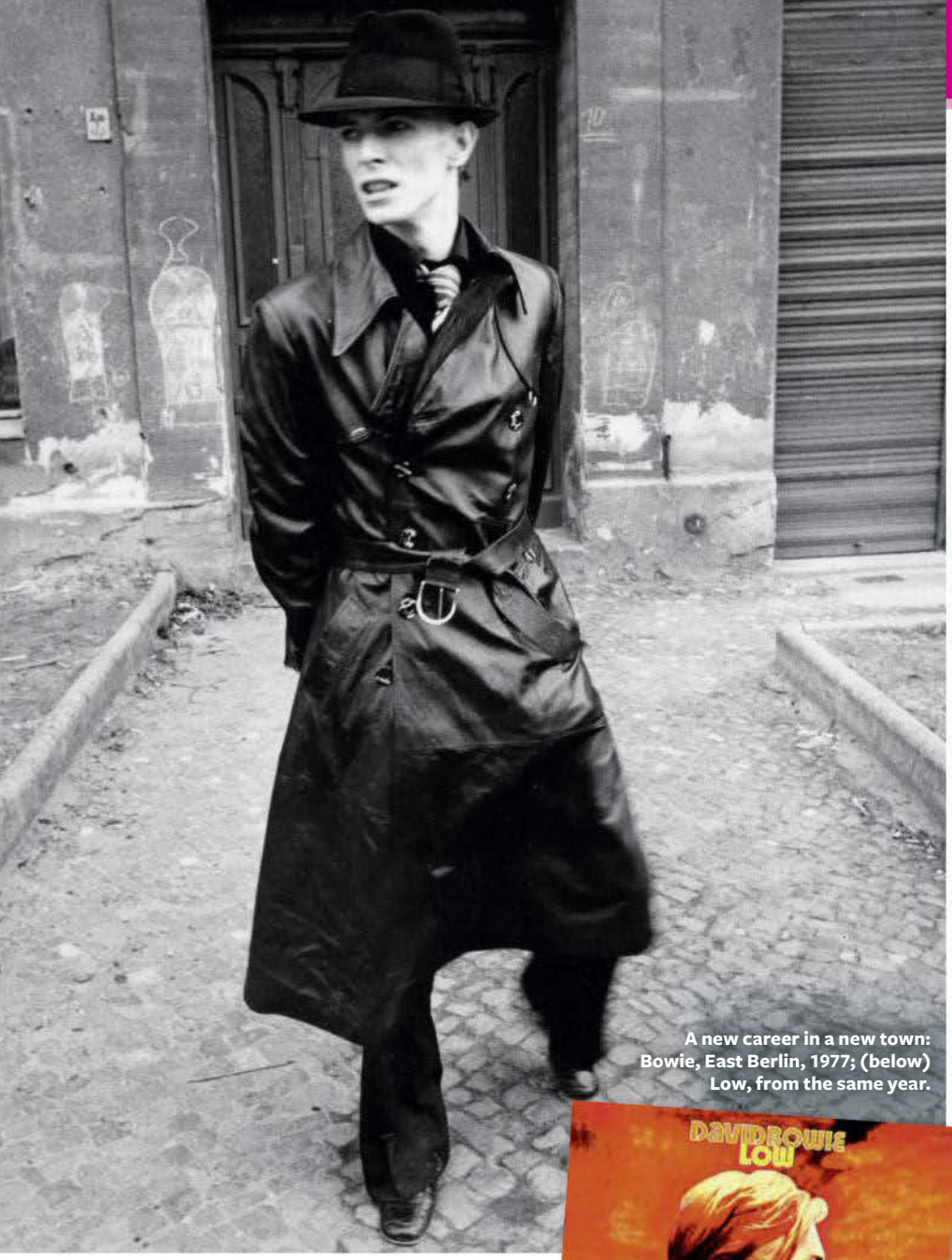
In retrospect, there was also a sense of Bowie's interest in Berlin being tangled up with his coke-assisted interest in the Nazis, something revealed by some of his most ill-advised interview quotes ("I am the only alternative for the premier in England... Britain could benefit from a fascist leader," he told an interviewer in Sweden, a claim he soon disowned). The idea of Bowie as some frazzled Hitler-believer was hyped up on the infamous occasion when he was wrongly alleged to have greeted British fans with a Nazi salute – but his fascination with German fascism was revealed soon after the Swedish interview, when in April 1976, he and Iggy (among others) travelled by train from Switzerland to Moscow, and Soviet customs officers confiscated books about Hitler's propagandist Joseph Goebbels, and his architect, Albert Speer.

Iggy had been part of Bowie's entourage since the LA dates, serving as a backing vocalist, and quickly cementing a friendship that would define the next two years. Indeed, the Berlin period is defined not just by three Bowie albums, but the two Iggy records on which the pair worked – the first of which is so completely entwined with Bowie's Berlin music that it has to be understood as being part of the same body of work.

Starting in July 1976, The Idiot was mostly recorded at the Château D'Hérouville, 20 miles north of Paris, but taken to completion at Hansa Tonstudio, the place that still stands as a byword for Bowie's time in Berlin. The Idiot has a lot in common with the Bowie music recorded in its wake: sparse, angular arrangements; a sense of American R&B influences being thoroughly twisted out of shape, and guitars habitually cutting into the songs, as if to break them open. By way of confirming the idea that the two of them were in the same creative mindset, the cover picture nodded to Roquairol, a portrait by the German expressionist painter Erich Heckel; the same painting would later inspire the sleeve of Bowie's "Heroes".

Exactly when The Idiot stopped and Bowie's Low started has always been unclear, partly thanks to the fact that they both involved producer Tony Visconti. What is

Where are we now? (left) Bowie on tour with Iggy Pop, London, March, 1977; (above) with then wife, Angie, on Good Morning America, '76; (right) Pop/Bowie HQ, 155 Hauptstrasse, Berlin.



A new career in a new town: Bowie, East Berlin, 1977; (below) Low, from the same year.

clear is that despite having settled on the idea of living in Berlin, Bowie went back to the French château – "It was a joy – ramshackle and comfy," he said – for a month, before returning to Berlin to add Low's lyrics and vocals. The sessions soon included Brian Eno, who co-wrote some of the songs, added synthesizer parts, and introduced Bowie to a new element of disruptive creativity.

Eno straightaway understood that Bowie was somehow "trying to duck the momentum of a successful career"; Bowie credited Eno with nudging him away from his last ties to rock conventions, not least when it came to lyrics. "He got me off narration, which I was so bored with," he said: among the proof were not just a selection of instrumentals, but two pieces of music – Warszawa and Subterraneans – on which there were vocals, but no discernible language.

Eno's presence crystallised the influences that swirled around this phase of Bowie's career. The supposed Berlin trilogy is really the ultimate flowering of a musical aesthetic that had been bubbling away since the early 1970s – built on an experimental push to tear up rock orthodoxy, but free of the indulgences of so-called progressive rock. To understand it, you have to soak up such Eno records as Here Come The Warm Jets (1974), Another Green World (1975), the proto-ambient Discreet Music (1975) and (No Pussyfooting), the amorphous album Eno made in 1973 with the visionary guitarist Robert Fripp, one of the founders of King Crimson. Eno and Bowie were both huge fans of the three albums made by Neu! in the 1970s, and in particular Neu! '75 – which, like Low and "Heroes", was split into two distinct sides (and, whether coincidentally or not, featured a song called Hero). They also thrilled to the early work of Tangerine Dream, Kraftwerk, and other German iconoclasts such as Can and Cluster, with whom Eno would soon work.

On Low, as with every album that followed it, Bowie stuck to a three-stage creative process. He would arrive at the studio bearing not much more than fragments. First, the initial building blocks of the songs would be created very quickly. Next, overdubs would begin to flesh out what had been recorded. Finally, Bowie would work on his lyrics and vocal parts – though as evidenced by the fact that half of Low (Side Two, in old money) was pretty much instrumental, it was obvious that he wanted the music to take precedence over the words. "He couldn't come up with more than a verse for some songs, which is why a lot of the tracks fade out," said Tony Visconti. The lyrics were fractured and minimal, and often – as on the pretty much perfect Sound And Vision, on which the first verse didn't begin until 90 seconds in – based on backwards glances to his wretched time in LA.

That said, some of what Bowie sang described his experiences in Berlin. Always Crashing In The Same Car – which sounds like an early try-out for the basic musical idea behind "Heroes" (the song) – was a glimpse of an incident that had occurred when Bowie and Iggy had spotted a drug dealer who had ripped them off, on the Kurfürstendamm, one of West Berlin's main streets. Bowie reversed his Mercedes into the dealer's car: "I rammed him for a good five to 10 minutes," he later recalled. "Nobody stopped. Nobody did anything." Behind the wheel, he later flipped out in the car park of his and Iggy's hotel, something described in the second verse: "As I pushed my foot down to the floor/I was going 'round and 'round/The hotel garage/Must have been touching close to 94."

Contrary to the idea of some spell of self-authored rehab, such were the more reckless aspects of the Berlin period. By the time Low was taken to completion at Hansa, Bowie and Iggy had moved from their initial base in a hotel to 155 Hauptstrasse. They had got into the habit of socialising at such clubs as the Dschungel (German for "Jungle") on Nürnberger Strasse, and SO36, a punk-oriented venue in the Kreuzberg district. Bowie had continued an on-off relationship with Romy Haag, a six-foot tall Dutch transgender woman who had turned herself into an icon of Berlin's cabaret scene.

The kind of grinding excess that had defined Bowie's time in LA was off limits, though he developed a pronounced fondness for German beer, and the odd bit of »

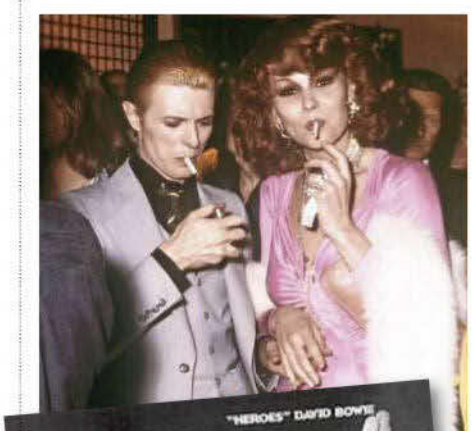
GETTY, ANDREW KENT, PETER GILLMAN

We could be heroes: (from left, sitting) Robert Fripp, Bowie and Brian Eno, Hansa Tonstudio, Berlin, 1977.

chemical refreshment definitely entered the picture. Iggy gave some indication of how their schedule tended to work: "There's seven days in a week: two for bingeing, two for recovery, and three more for any other activity."

In early 1977, Bowie re-entered Iggy's creative world. On the UK tour that promoted The Idiot, he took the seemingly unlikely role of keyboard player, and when they returned to Berlin, the two of them worked on Lust For Life, the album that would bring back Iggy's innate rock'n'roll sensibility, and thereby push Bowie's overt influence slightly to one side (bass and drums were played by Tony and Hunt Sales, the brothers who would later join Bowie in his rum designer-hard rock project Tin Machine). Besides the reckless title track, its key highlight was The Passenger, a glimpse of Bowie and Iggy's time in Berlin, seen through the prism of the latter's standard issue rock'n'roll romance ("We'll ride through the city tonight/ We'll see the city's ripped backsides") rather than Bowie's very English sense of slightly bookish outsiderdom.

And then came "Heroes": the one Bowie album that was wholly conceived, written and recorded in Berlin, and which evokes the city in almost every note. It was recorded in Hansa's spacious Studio 2 (aka the Meistersaal), a former ballroom which looked out onto the wall that separated the Communist East from the capitalist West: as Tony Visconti later put it, the space in which the music came to life was, "500 feet from barbed wire, and a tall tower where you could see gun turrets, with foreign soldiers looking at us with binoculars."



(Above) Bowie with transgender girlfriend, Romy Haag, Studio 54, New York, 1976; (left) "Heroes", 1977.

It was at these sessions that Brian Eno made repeated use of his Oblique Strategies cards, a collection of 55 random instructions – "Use an old idea", "Work at a different speed" – used to try and push the musicians out of any dead ends. Visconti had a brief fling with a German jazz singer called Antonia Maass, who sang backing vocals on the title track – and, when Bowie glimpsed the couple kissing in the shadow of the wall, provided inspiration for one of that song's most evocative lines ("And the guns shot above our heads/And we kissed, as though nothing could fall"). Robert Fripp, who stayed at the sessions for a mere six hours, overlaid the same song with bittersweet, gliding guitar lines: the result, on an album altogether more prickly and confrontational than Low, was a stand-out track that somehow combined a sense of euphoria with an unshakeable sadness. Other songs on the album – Sons Of The Silent Age, the instrumental pieces V-2 Schneider and Neukölln – brilliantly evoked Berlin, but it was "Heroes" that most sounded like the city it was recorded in, full of what Bowie called, "a sense of yearning for a future that we all knew would never come to pass."

"Heroes" – the album – was released in October 1977. Two months later, Bowie went back to the house his wife had bought in Switzerland to spend Christmas with their son.

CORBIS, EMI ARCHIVES/SUKITA, REX, GETTY

Back to the future: from the "Heroes" album cover shoot, 1977.

1947-2016 DAVID BOWIE ALBUM BY ALBUM

At the same time, the wider world saw the brilliantly incongruous guest spot he had recorded for a TV Christmas special built around that icon of the pre-rock age, Bing Crosby. Bowie sang "Heroes" and indulged in some scripted banter with the host ("I've got a six-year-old son, and he gets really excited around the Christmas holiday thing"), before the two of them performed a duet that mixed the old Christmas standard Little Drummer Boy with an original piece called Peace On Earth. As against the skeletal man-alien who had promoted Young Americans and Station To Station, Bowie looked elegant and calm, while holding on to his customary sense of otherness: here, it seemed, was proof of the restorative wonders of his time in Berlin.

Angie Bowie returned to the Swiss house on 2 January to find her husband and their son gone. She then attempted suicide; she would do the same thing three months later.

In early 1978, Bowie went back to Berlin to film his part in Just A Gigolo, directed by the English actor David Hemmings, in which he took the part of a Prussian army officer-turned-male prostitute who works in a brothel run by a madam played by Marlene Dietrich (her iconic presence was the main reason Bowie had agreed to take part, but she filmed all her scenes separately, in Paris). That March, he began the 77-date world tour titled Isolar II, which would be commemorated by the live album Stage. And in between its dates, he began work on Lodger, the supposed closing album of the Berlin trilogy, which was actually begun in Swizerland, and completed in New York.

Its 10 songs clearly brimmed over with ideas: the surreally complex African Night Flight, for example, suggests someone trying to soundtrack hundreds of thoughts at once. Some of the tracks – Fantastic Voyage, Look Back In Anger, the "Heroes"-ish Boys Keep Swinging – were superb. But there was also a sense of the artistic set-up Bowie had employed over the last few years bringing diminishing returns. Tony Visconti would later recall Brian Eno taking the Oblique Strategies mindset to mind-boggling extremes, at one point writing eight guitar chords on a blackboard, instructing the musicians to "play a funky groove", and then demanding they switch to whichever chord he pointed to. "This was not Brian's finest idea," said Visconti, "and I could see the rhythm section exchanging irritable looks as if to say, 'What an asshole'."

By this point, Iggy Pop had taken his own path, which would quickly lead to what one critic later called "a haze of dope and booze". Bowie, meanwhile, would record his next album without Eno, in New York, decisively leaving the Berlin period behind. But the influence of the music he made between 1976 and 1979 would soon be built into music for keeps.

Joy Division were at first called Warsaw, in tribute to the Low track Warszawa. Ian Curtis killed himself after an evening spent watching Werner Herzog's film Stroszek and listening to The Idiot; the Joy Division and New Order drummer Stephen Morris would later recall listening to Low, and realising he was hearing "the Sound Of The Future". Such post-punk groups as Wire and Magazine had clearly been tuning in, and a little later on, Simple Minds – who took their name from a line in The Jean Genie – developed the dramatic, European, electronic Berlin ethos into something approaching an ideal of living, later revived by the Manic Street Preachers on Futurology, an album partly recorded at Hansa. But perhaps the most obvious proof of the Berlin era's influence was the arrival – just as Bowie put out Lodger – of Gary Numan, whose every move suggested someone staging his own tribute to this phase of Bowie's career. "I never meant for cloning to be part of the '80s," Bowie sniffed.

Thirty four years after he had moved into the apartment on Hauptstrasse, Bowie himself returned to the Berlin period on Where Are We Now?, the jaw-dropping single that heralded the release of 2013's The Next Day, whose sleeve reprised the cover image of "Heroes". The song's impossibly evocative, beautifully melancholic four minutes caught Bowie looking back at himself, "sitting in the Dschungel/On Nürnberger Strasse/A man lost in time." The lines suggested someone who had been adrift and unsure of what he was up to. But the music he had created back then attested to something very different: Bowie being Bowie, he seemed to know exactly what he was doing. *JOHN HARRIS*

Goodbye to Berlin: (left) on Bing Crosby's Christmas special, 1977; (below) the trilogy's end, Lodger, 1979.

"HEROES" SOUNDED LIKE THE CITY IT WAS RECORDED IN, FULL OF WHAT BOWIE CALLED "A SENSE OF YEARNING FOR A FUTURE THAT WOULD NEVER COME TO PASS."

"BOWIE WALKED IN WITH A CLIPBOARD, A MOUSTACHE, AND WEARING A BIG CRUCIFIX AROUND HIS NECK."
GUITARIST CHUCK HAMMER

Clowning around, 1980: "at a stroke, Bowie had reclaimed his crown as musical visionary and beacon of modernity."

1980

SCARY MONSTERS (AND SUPER CREEPS) (1980)

A new decade, a new city and a new direction that would put DB back at the top of the charts.

In January 1980, as a new decade dawned and Bowie turned 33 – the crucial so-called "Jesus Age", when Christ supposedly met his maker – it was perhaps only natural that the singer should contemplate a fresh start. With the Berlin Trilogy wrapped up, and his working relationships with Brian Eno and Iggy Pop done (for now), it was the perfect time for a typical Bowie reboot. Relocated to New York, that winter he summoned Carlos Alomar and his other core players to The Power Station on West 53rd Street to begin work on a more commercial record, Scary Monsters (And Super Creeps) – a futuristic, avant-garde pop album that would presage the theatricality and synthetic gloss of much '80s chart music and, for the first time, publicly acknowledge the singer's status as a storied rock deity. It was to be his final, and most successful, recording for RCA.

Bowie had rented an apartment on West 26th Street in Chelsea towards the end of 1979, and settled there in the early months of the following year. His aide, Coco Schwab, moved in with him and, completing the family atmosphere, Alomar and his wife took a flat in the same block. Sessions for a new album began in February; and this time there would be little sign of the experimental and sometimes plain bizarre songwriting techniques that Bowie and Brian Eno had employed on Lodger.

According to producer Tony Visconti, although it was never overtly expressed, there was a palpable sense that Bowie wanted to make a record that would have a mainstream appeal that the Berlin LPs clearly hadn't. To put it bluntly, he wanted a hit. Bowie easing off the cocaine contributed towards a clarity of purpose, as did a new, super-organised studio methodology.

"Bowie walked into the studio with a clipboard, he had a moustache, and was wearing a leather coat with Japanese sandals, and a big crucifix around his neck," session guitarist Chuck Hammer told Bowie biographer Paul Trynka. "He was very open, but very organised."

New York had been a fertile location for Bowie since he'd hung out with the Warhol crowd and cut The Jean Genie there in 1972, and the city once again stoked his creative energy. Acting as auteur, he gave instructions to his musicians – primarily Alomar, bassist George Murray and drummer Dennis Davis – and then shaped the results with Visconti. A request to work up a tune around a Bo Diddley beat became the foundation of the soulful Up The Hill Backwards, while the call for a "mid-paced groove" supplied the skeletal frame of Fashion. Elsewhere, Bowie sketched out chord changes or resuscitated old demos while the band filled in the gaps.

Still smarting from his fight with Lou Reed the previous year, after Bowie had told him to "clean up his act", the singer mischievously elected to poach Reed's guitarist, Chuck Hammer, to try out a new innovation, the synth-guitar, on the backing track of what would become Ashes To Ashes. "It was very experimental even for us," recalled Visconti. "It was 50/50 if he would make the cut." Meanwhile, Bruce Springsteen's pianist, Roy Bittan, provided the song's wistful, minimalist keyboard motif.

In April, Bowie and Visconti relocated to London, where further collaborators joined the fray. In an extraordinary attempt at real-time composition, Robert Fripp created the jerky metallic riff to Fashion in a single pass, while an ill-tempered Pete Townshend, fuelled by Burgundy (and declaring, "There's no such thing as white wine!"), contributed to Because You're Young.

Scary Monsters: "a futuristic, avant-garde pop album."

The LP's lyrics, fermenting in the singer's mind since New York, were nailed last. Among the most intriguing were those for Ashes To Ashes, a curious essay in self-awareness that revives the Major Tom character from Space Oddity; and for Teenage Wildlife, which poked fun at the "new wave" of New Romantic artists that were threatening to steal Bowie's thunder, the song's "broken-nosed mogul" later being identified by Gary Numan (a possible culprit) as Visage's Steve Strange. Meanwhile, singer/model Michi Hirota intoned Japanese lyrics on opener It's No Game (No. 1), adding to the album's chic, edgy, catwalk feel.

Album done, it was ironically to New Romantic haven the Blitz club in Covent Garden that Bowie headed to cast extras – including Steve Strange – for the video for Ashes To Ashes, the LP's lead single, which hit Number 1 in September 1980. The scenes on Southend beach of the singer, dressed in a Pierrot clown costume, in the vanguard of a crowd of Blitz regulars, proved an apt metaphor for Scary Monsters' impact: at a stroke, Bowie had reclaimed his crown as musical visionary and beacon of modernity, and what's more, reached the top of the charts.

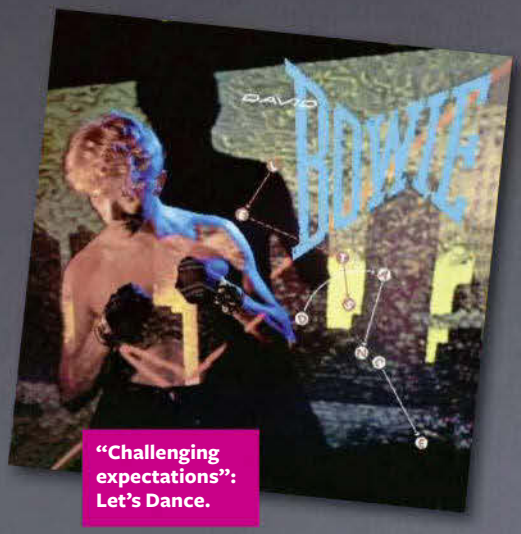
But just as the singer was once again ascendant, a dramatic event took place that December that would profoundly shake him. While performing the lead part in The Elephant Man on Broadway, he learned that his friend, John Lennon had been shot dead just blocks away. Later, it transpired that Bowie had been a possible alternative target. Justifiably paranoid, further promotion for Scary Monsters was now the last thing on his mind, and he retreated to the comparative safety of Switzerland. *PAT GILBERT*

DUFFY ARCHIVE

1983

LET'S DANCE (1983)

David Bowie rips up his manual and rejoins the human race.



"Challenging expectations": Let's Dance.

"There is no inherent value or real meaning in 'cool'," announced David Bowie. "Consequently, I'm hoping to do something which will mean a bit more to my fellow man." It was spring 1983, Bowie had turned 36, and had settled down in squeaky-clean Lausanne, Switzerland, and now wanted to uplift his audience, not disturb them: "I need to write music that puts things very, very simply on the line."

The first evidence of this simpler, more consumer-friendly Bowie was April 1983's Let's Dance. The cover photo alone spoke volumes: Bowie with a beach-bum tan, pumped deltoids... boxing gloves? And the music? A mash-up of ritzy Euro funk and Texas blues – and full of hits. But Bowie's new direction meant casualties. The first were his record label RCA; the second was long-time producer Tony Visconti, and the third was an audience who wanted their hero to adhere to some imaginary art-rock manifesto.

Instead, Bowie shocked purist rock fans by hiring Chic guitarist and disco godhead Nile Rodgers as his co-producer. Before the sessions began at New York's Power Station in December '82, Bowie played Rodgers his favourite records and showed him pictures of his childhood idol Little Richard. It was a subtle grooming process. But it took time for Rodgers to realise.

Bowie's demo for the title track, Let's Dance, sounded like folk music, and certainly not a hit. In desperation, Rodgers returned to Bowie's record collection and borrowed The Beatles' opening vocal ("Ah... Ah... Ah...") from Twist And Shout for the song's intro. Then he dropped in the horn riff from Henry Mancini's theme to Peter Gunn. Let's Dance went from folk-rock to a melee of hard grooves and non-grooves. The first of three UK and US Top 20 hits, it defined the whole album: dance music you couldn't actually dance to.

So impressed were EMI America by the album's backing tracks, that in January '83 they signed Bowie for a reputed $17million or thereabouts; very impressive as he'd not had a Top 10 US hit since 1975's Golden Years. But EMI were getting what RCA never had: Young Americans part two.

As the sessions continued, Rodgers realised Bowie had given him unprecedented freedom: to choose the musicians and to deconstruct his music. Bowie ended up with a blank but rhythmic canvas over which he could throw whatever colours he liked.

Then, Bowie surprised Rodgers by hiring Texan blues guitarist Stevie Ray Vaughan. Vaughan was no Bowie aficionado and arrived without any preconceived ideas. He just plugged in and played: a machine-gun volley of notes over the finale of Let's Dance; measured but dazzlingly effective solos on Cat People (Putting Out Fire), some fabulous lazy runs throughout Criminal World...

Despite a willingness to delegate, Let's Dance was still Bowie to the core. On the opening track, Modern Love, amid walloping drums and a two-note piano figure, he explained his new mission statement – "I know when ta go aht, and when ta stay in, get things done..."

Metaphorically speaking, this was Bowie in a striped shirt and braces, barking into a housebrick-sized portable phone; a Thatcherite go-getter "getting things done" on the trading floor after a lunchtime workout. Some seasoned Bowie watchers cringed. But the rest of the world tuned in.

Every song on Let's Dance also came with some tic, some peculiarity that stopped the listener getting too comfortable. Ricochet saw Bowie droning on about "pieces of machinery, mine shafts, things like that" over an ungainly rhythm. The album's second hit, China Girl, brilliantly retooled Bowie and Iggy Pop's 1977 track by twisting the riff to dance act Rufus's Sweet Thing. But lines such as, "Visions of swastikas in my head" also allowed Bowie to sneak his and Pop's druggy paranoia onto daytime Radio 1.

Thanks to those hits and director David Mallet's MTV-endorsed videos, Let's Dance became the David Bowie LP for people who didn't usually like David Bowie. By the end of '83, it was up there with Michael Jackson's Thriller in the year's best sellers. Yet critical disdain endured as it soared towards platinum sales. As did the notion that Bowie had "sold out". To what? To whom?

In fact, Let's Dance questioned the tedious notion of "cool" and was Bowie doing what he always did best: challenging expectations. A white South Londoner, a black New Yorker and a good ol' boy from Texas walk into a recording studio sounds like the set-up for a dubious joke. In fact, it was the catalyst for one of the best David Bowie albums in almost a decade. And what could be "cooler" than that? *MARK BLAKE*

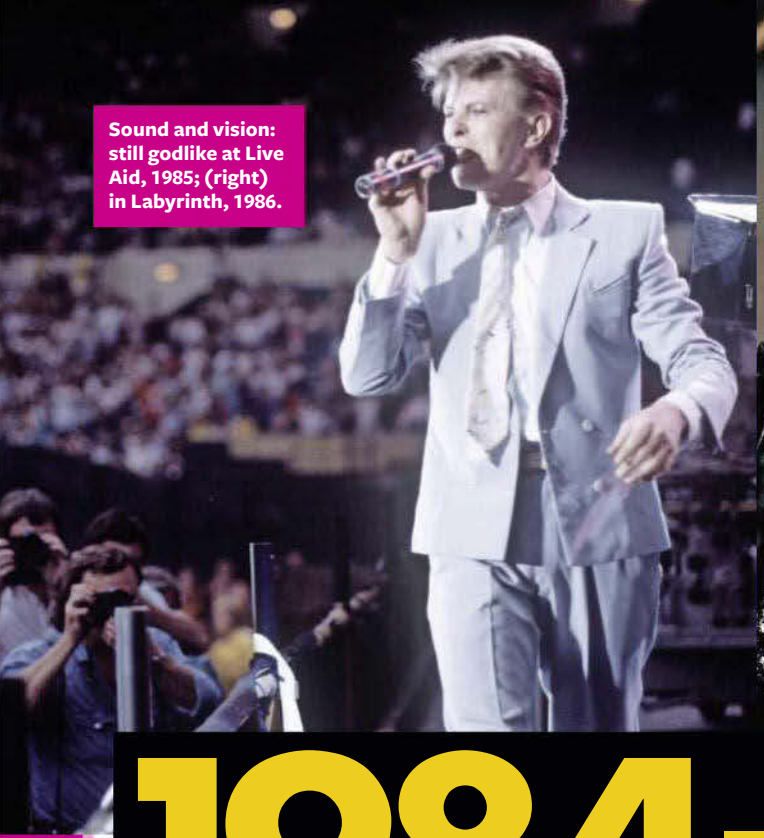
Hitsville USA: (from left) Bowie, Stevie Ray Vaughan and Nile Rodgers, New York, 1983.

"I NEED TO WRITE MUSIC THAT PUTS THINGS VERY, VERY SIMPLY ON THE LINE."

EMI ARCHIVES, CORBIS

1947-2016
DAVID BOWIE
ALBUM BY ALBUM

Platinum years: Bowie enters the commercial major leagues, 1983.



Sound and vision: still godlike at Live Aid, 1985; (right) in Labyrinth, 1986.

1984-99

TONIGHT (1984) NEVER LET ME DOWN (1987) TIN MACHINE (1989) TIN MACHINE II (1991) BLACK TIE WHITE NOISE (1993) THE BUDDHA OF SUBURBIA (1993) OUTSIDE (1995) EARTHLING (1997) 'HOURS...' (1999)

"Short of ideas": (from top right) Tonight, Never Let Me Down, Tin Machine, Tin Machine II.

The long plateau...

On 21 September, 1984, the full-length promo film for David Bowie's new single, Blue Jean, premiered on UK TV amid a crackle of expectancy. Shot by Sex Pistols film-maker Julien Temple, and 21 minutes long, Jazzin' For Blue Jean saw the singer in the dual roles of window cleaner Vic and an exotic pop star called Screaming Lord Byron. At the denouement, Byron steals Vic's date, to which Vic froths, "You conniving, randy, bogus-Oriental old queen! Your record sleeves are better than your songs!"

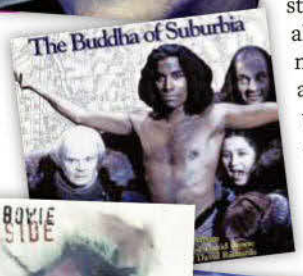
The real-life Bowie was having fun at his legend's expense, of course, but when it came to his new album, Tonight, Vic may have had a point. And, as the singer's career began to plateau over the next decade or so, style would appear increasingly to take second place to content. Yet Bowie would never lose his ability to surprise and innovate – or produce the occasional musical gem.

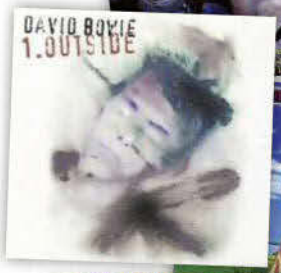
Perhaps it was inevitable that after 20 years and 15 studio LPs, Bowie's creative elan would begin to fade. Let's Dance had made him a superstar of the MTV generation and 1983's Merry Christmas, Mr Lawrence a successful mainstream film actor, yet by the time he came to record Tonight in 1984 the desire to create another landmark record had evaporated. When recording began at Le Studio, near Montreal, Bowie appeared "bored". If he did have a vision in mind, then it was a blend of white reggae and soft soul – his co-producers having recently worked with The Police (Hugh Padgham) and Jaki Graham (Derek Bramble).

But it was the arrival at the studio of Iggy Pop that would settle the album's curious direction: perhaps with China Girl in mind, Bowie elected to make it a kind of tribute to (and money-spinner for) his old friend, co-writing a new song with him and resuscitating three solo Iggy tracks from the late '70s, including Tonight from Lust For Life, this time given a cod-reggae treatment. Two more covers – of The Beach Boys' God Only Knows and Chuck Jackson's I Keep Forgettin' – further suggested an artist desperately short on fresh ideas; though the two new originals Bowie did muster, Loving The Alien and Blue Jean, would sit seamlessly within his illustrious canon.

Tonight went to Number 1 in the UK, and 11 in the US, but it came to mark the start of a protracted fall from grace. Bowie himself seemed unconcerned, regarding it as a Pin Ups-style stop-gap, and immersed himself in film, first with a role in Julien Temple's Absolute Beginners (the title track another Bowie pearl) in 1986 and then

(Clockwise, from left) With wife Iman, 1993; in the pop-forsaking Tin Machine, 1989; embracing UK dance music, 1997. (Right, from top) Black Tie White Noise, The Buddha Of Suburbia, Outside, Earthling and 'Hours...'.





in the children's fantasy, Labyrinth, in the same year.

His appearance at Live Aid in 1985 had confirmed that, however poor his last album was, he was still the godlike David Bowie, but the musical decline accelerated with 1987's unremarkable Never Let Me Down, promoted by the overblown and savagely reviewed Glass Spider tour. Turning 40, Bowie was now experiencing something once unthinkable – mass-market appeal but critical immolation – so it was perhaps understandable when his next move was to forsake pop music and become the singer in a hard-rock outfit.

Tin Machine – formed with Iggy's old rhythm section, brothers Tony and Hunt Sales, plus newbie guitarist Reeves Gabrels – was a project seemingly contrived to cocoon Bowie within the protective bubble of a "proper" band and also, perhaps, revive his cult status. Instead, the group's metallic muso assaults, on 1989's self-titled debut and 1991's II, seemed only to further alienate and confuse fans. Bowie would later claim that Tin Machine "charged me up – I can't tell you how much", at a time when he'd been artistically adrift. Yet his next solo effort, 1993's Black Tie White Noise, cut with Nile Rodgers not long after the singer finally settled down, marrying model Iman, had little to distinguish it from his bland late-'80s pop and rock. His low-key soundtrack that same year to BBC TV's adaptation of The Buddha Of Suburbia was much better.

"TIN MACHINE CHARGED ME UP – I CAN'T TELL YOU HOW MUCH."

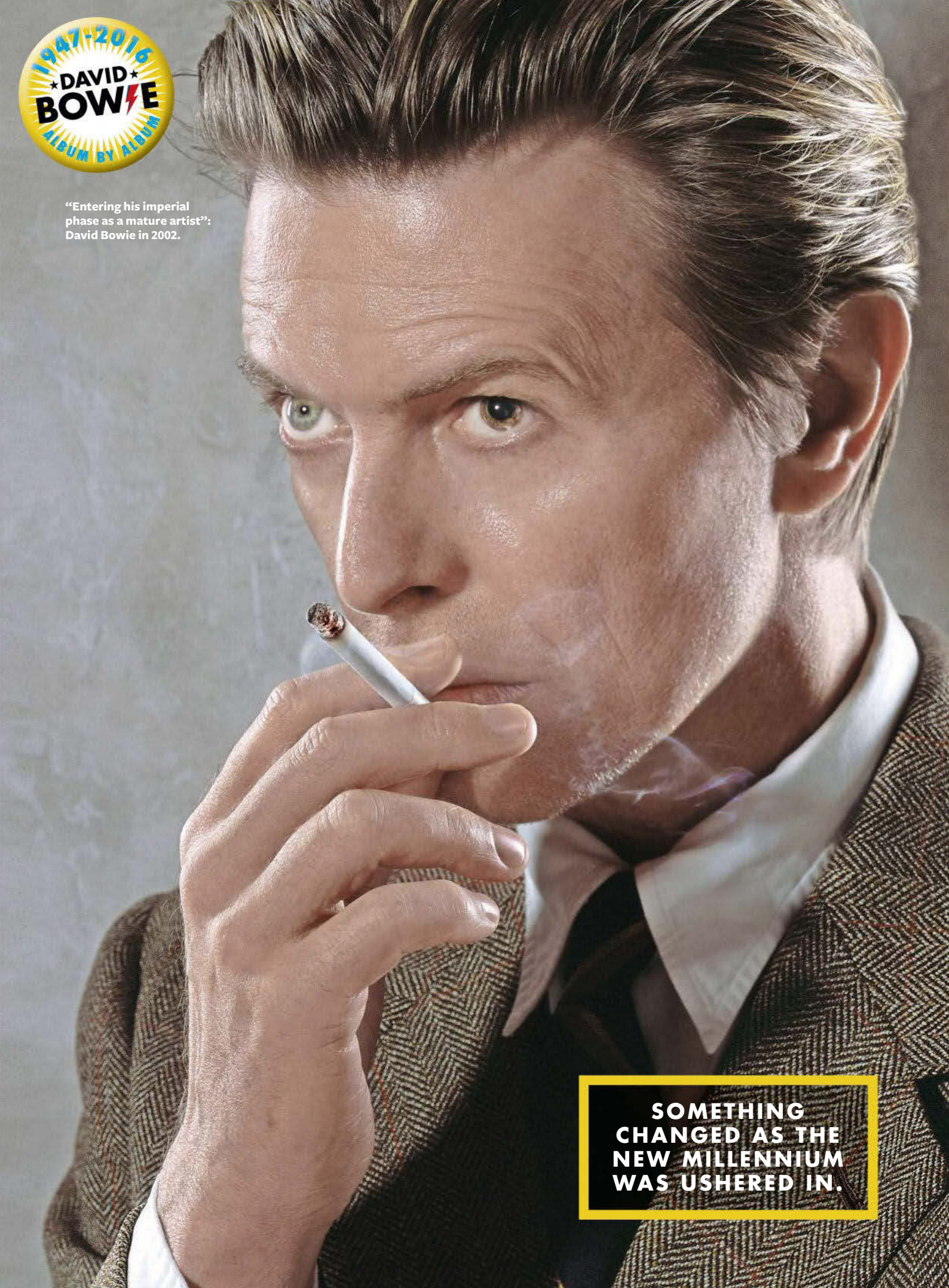
The job of rescuing Bowie from his midlife doldrums tellingly fell to his old Berlin Trilogy partner, Brian Eno, whose visit with the singer to the Haus Der Künstler, an artists' community within a psychiatric hospital near Vienna, would provide the magic avant-garde spark for 1995's Outside album, a strange, experimental and alluring record whose narrative was shaped around a short story Bowie had written for Q magazine, and which spawned the reassuringly quirky Top 20 hit, Hallo Spaceboy.

Re-energised and enamoured, belatedly, with '90s British dance culture, in 1997 the singer cut a spirited "drum'n'bass" LP, Earthling, but it was the flotation on the stock exchange that year of his back catalogue, via "Bowie Bonds", that would be his coup de grâce, earning him around £40m and taking his outsider thinking into the world of business. He followed it in 1998 with his own internet provider, BowieNet.

As the '90s closed with another electronic LP, 'Hours...', developed from the soundtrack to a video game, Bowie stood on the cusp of a new century with his reputation as an innovator restored, and as a musician with everything to play for... *PAT GILBERT*

REX; BOB GRUEN; ICONICPIX; TOPFOTO; GETTY

1947-2016
DAVID BOWIE
ALBUM BY ALBUM



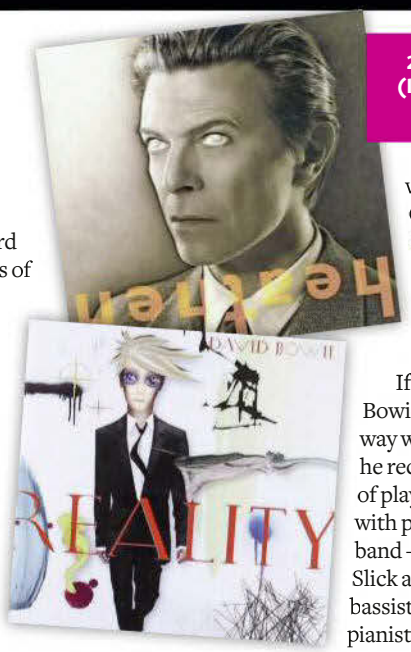
"Entering his imperial phase as a mature artist": David Bowie in 2002.

SOMETHING CHANGED AS THE NEW MILLENNIUM WAS USHERED IN.

2002-03

HEATHEN (2002) REALITY (2003)

Out of step for so long, the Dame gets his groove back.



21st-century boy: (left) Heathen and (below) Reality.

David Bowie spent the '90s treating the past less as a foreign country and more like it was another planet. He'd kept to the promise he made at the start of the decade to drop his old hits, with live shows made up of new songs and obscure album tracks. But something changed as the new millennium was ushered in. Revitalised by the sense of out-there adventure on his '90s output (Bowie seemed thrilled by the fact that 1995's Outside was so odd he struggled to find a label to put it out) and becoming a father again, Bowie started to embrace his back catalogue rather than be daunted by it. The decade began with a headline slot at Glastonbury that was loaded with his biggest hits. This softening towards his old material shaped the approach to Heathen, his 25th studio album.

Bowie and Tony Visconti had discussed working together again for years. Keeping in mind the high regard for their previous work, they made a pact that a reunion would have to be for something momentous – not just another David Bowie album. Bowie began 2001 by stockpiling what he thought were his strongest new melodies and recording commenced soon after, split between studios in upstate New York, Virginia, London and New York City.

What emerged was a sprawling rock album that had more in common with the twisted rock of 1980's Scary Monsters (And Super Creeps) than anything Bowie had done in the intervening 22 years. Heathen is filled with nods to the past: The Who's Pete Townshend, who appeared on Scary Monsters, plays the menacing guitar riff that dominates Slow Burn. The racing cosmic-pop of I Took A Trip On A Gemini Spaceship is a cover of a track by Texan cult hero The Legendary Stardust Cowboy, to whom Bowie felt indebted after borrowing part of his name for his most famous alter-ego.

The nostalgia never weighs heavy, though. The songs flow into each other seamlessly, veering between washed-out atmospherics and crunching rockers. Everything is underpinned by some of Bowie's most direct lyrics yet. "Have I stared too long?" he sings on the affecting Heathen (The Rays). It's a record of Big Questions, the reflections of a man in his mid-50s no nearer to finding any answers. Bowie's influence on modern rock is acknowledged with a seething take on the Pixies' Cactus and a cover of Neil Young's I've Been Waiting For You that features Dave Grohl on guitar. Even on the cover versions, Bowie sounded like himself again.

Heathen sold two million copies worldwide and, heartened by its success, Bowie returned with his 26th LP, Reality, 15 months later. Although 9/11 took place during the making of Heathen, Bowie insisted the lyrics were completed before the terrorist attack. There's no doubt that it cast a shadow over Reality, though. The record's opening line, "See the great white scar over Battery Park", set the tone for an album of new wave-style rock. Gone were the lush sonic textures of Heathen, in their place wiry guitar lines and playfully ominous vocals.

If Heathen was Bowie rediscovering his way with melodies, here he recaptured the power of playing live in a room with people. His touring band – guitarists Earl Slick and Gerry Leonard, bassist Gail Ann Dorsey, pianist Mike Garson and drummer Sterling Campbell – all crammed into the tiny Studio B at New York's Looking Glass Studios to record. Visconti had planned to book the bigger room at the studio for album sessions but he was instructed to remain where he was: Bowie wanted Reality to be an album that reflected the urgency and claustrophobia of the city it was recorded in.

The result is one of modern Bowie's finest. From the moment the jagged guitars of New Killer Star kick in, Reality is an album that bristles with vitality. Bowie barks like a captain watching his ship go down on a raging cover of The Modern Lovers' Pablo Picasso and Never Get Old is a pounding anthem that sounds like Blur – by this point it was impossible to listen to Bowie without hearing all the bands he'd influenced. Amidst all the energy, ballad The Loneliest Guy is one of his most haunting songs.

There was a sense that Bowie was entering his imperial phase as a mature artist. Reality's theatrical snarling and groovy rhythms had reopened a musical world for him to explore. He spoke of the exhilaration at being able to put out an album a year again and everyone expected him to head back into the studio once the Reality world tour was complete. It seemed he'd found a comfort zone between the past and the present. But comfort zones never really suited David Bowie. It would be almost a decade until he picked up the thread. *NIALL DOHERTY*

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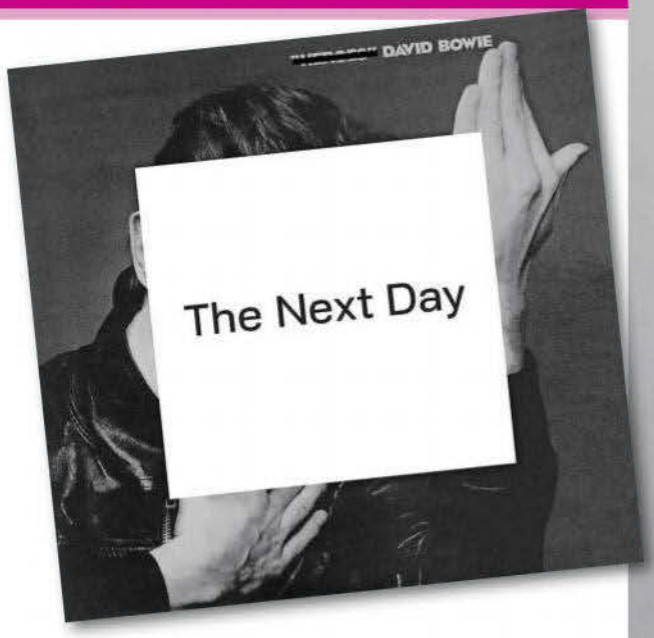
An electrifying concert film with Bowie at the peak of his powers in 1983 on his Serious Moonlight Tour.

David Bowie: A Reality Tour
Bowie performs tracks spanning his 30-plus years in the business at Point Theatre in Dublin in 2003 as part of the worldwide tour for his Reality album.

David Bowie: Glass Spider Tour
Bowie's 1987 Glass Spider Tour was the biggest live spectacle of his career, serving up a theatrical show of elaborate visual effects and stage props.

1947-2016 DAVID BOWIE ALBUM BY ALBUM

2013



THE NEXT DAY (2013)

After a decade's absence, Bowie comes in from the cold.

Waking up to 8 January, 2013: a regular kind of news day, with fearful reports of global instability and foreboding garnished with the usual celebrity spume. But for music-heads at least, there was something else, something wondrous. At 5am, with zero notice, David Bowie had put Where Are We Now?, his first all-new solo single for almost 10 years, on iTunes, and announced that a new album, The Next Day, would follow in March.

It didn't seem possible. After a heart attack in Germany in summer 2004 – possibly brought on by some "bastard" (Bowie's word) hitting him in the eye with a lollipop at a show in Norway – the rock era's most erudite shapeshifter had withdrawn from recording and touring. Hopes were raised by guest spots with artists including David Gilmour, TV On The Radio and Arcade Fire, though these dried up in 2006. Then, nothing.

Now, new thinking was needed, though Where Are We Now? was a downbeat way to explain where he'd been. Seemingly looking back to Bowie's wildly productive years in West Berlin from 1976 to 1979, the song was introverted and haunting, the singer weary and emotional as he recalled old hangouts and repeated the phrase, "walking the dead." It was accompanied by a video featuring his face projected onto a puppet and scenes of the old divided city: also packed with clues and questions was the single's cover art. This featured an upended image of him live in 1974, months after he'd abandoned the glam persona of the Diamond Dogs LP to become Young Americans' plastic soul man. The cover of The Next Day was starker still, being the sleeve of 1977's "Heroes" with its title erased and a white box bearing the album's name obscuring Bowie's face. Here were elegies, transitions and new settings. What was he trying to tell us?

Bowie, whose last media interview was for Ricky Gervais's sitcom Extras in 2006, wasn't telling. The LP had been recorded in similar secrecy, over two years in New York, with loyal co-producer Tony Visconti and familiar players, including guitarist Earl Slick and bassist Gail Ann Dorsey. But if the single had primed the world for multiple shades of lamentation, The Next Day – a title resonant with new creation, but somehow ominous – wrong-footed its audience in bravura style.

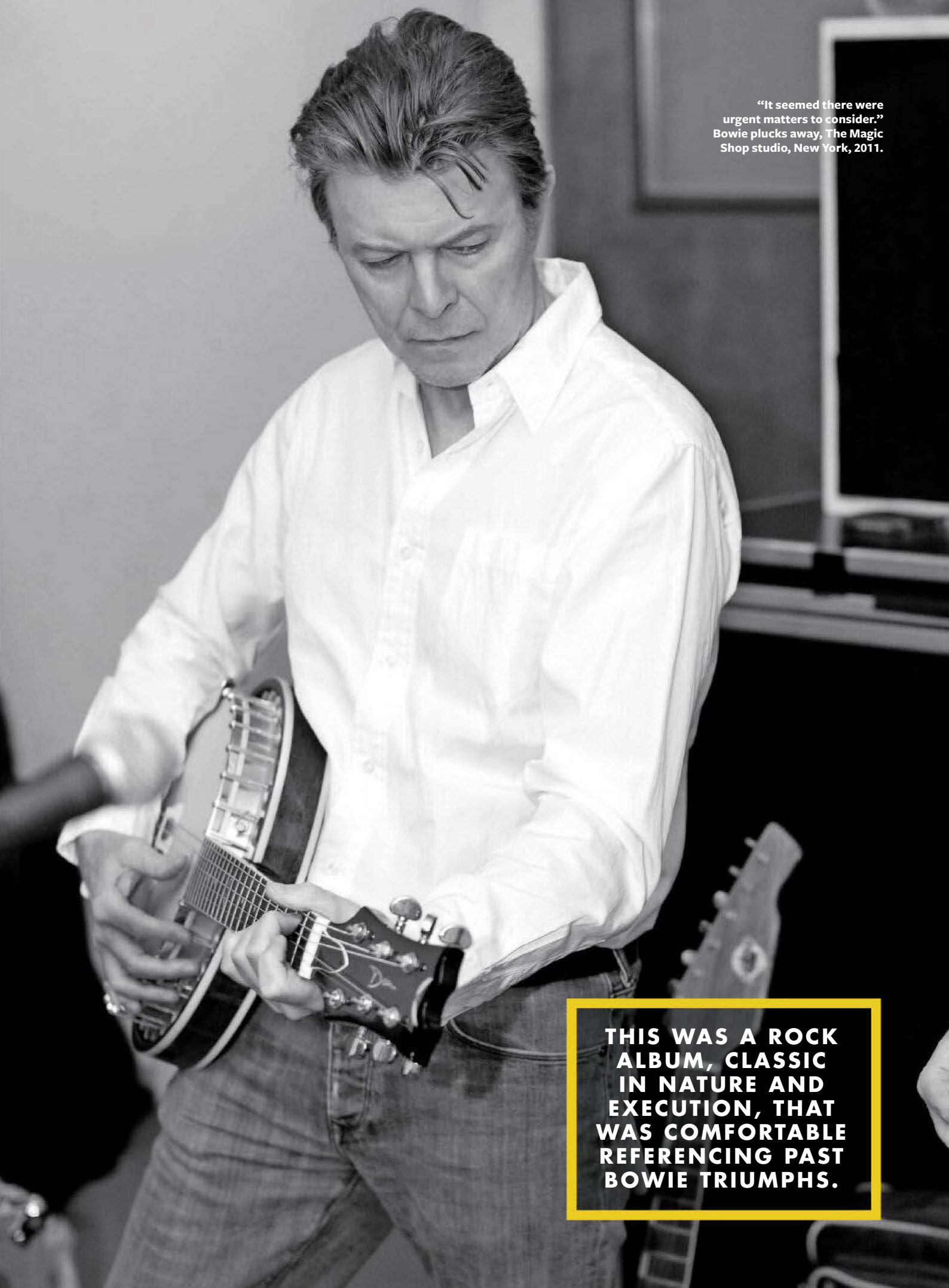
It immediately made you sit up straight and listen. This was a rock album, classic in nature and execution, that was comfortable referencing past Bowie triumphs such as Lodger, Low and Scary Monsters. The singer's in full command, and his lyrical concerns are raw and pressing, and can be read as character-based pieces or as part of a wider personal address. Take the stomping title track: like some violent late-medieval urban saturnalia which Visconti suggests relates to the execution of a tyrant by the masses, it includes the words, "Here I am/ Not quite dying/My body left to rot in a hollow tree," before envisaging an eternity of executions, Prometheus-style. Is this how Bowie regarded his enforced sabbatical?

It seemed there were urgent matters to consider. A peculiar kind of London violence is never far off, with the Rain Dogs-like Dirty Boys and drum'n'bass-influenced suite If You Can See Me bringing glam bovver, blue suede shoes and fairgrounds. Also drawn to the past are the Low-referencing, tortured Love Is Lost and the crunching (You Will) Set The World On Fire, which looks back with envy and admiration on the early-'60s East Village folk scene of Dylan, Joan Baez and Phil Ochs (Bowie sings "too much" in almost exactly the same way he did on 1966's The London Boys). Perhaps the most intriguing tracks are the somehow triumphant suicide song You Feel So Lonely You Could Die ("Oh please, please make it soon") and The Stars (Are Out Tonight), an almost Smiths-esque admission of normalcy and mortality. This was no new seam of confessional writing, though: as the closing, Scott Walker-indebted Heat says amongst its feverish references to whores, peacocks and Japanese poet Yukio Mishima, "I am a seer/I am a liar."

Protected by his peculiarly compelling kind of sincere artifice, The Next Day was Bowie feeling his way back into contention, proving beyond doubt that reports of his death had been exaggerated. *IAN HARRISON*

(Above) The promo clip for lead-off single Where Are We Now?; (below) in The Magic Shop studio, New York, 2011.

JIMMY KING



"It seemed there were urgent matters to consider." Bowie plucks away, The Magic Shop studio, New York, 2011.

THIS WAS A ROCK ALBUM, CLASSIC IN NATURE AND EXECUTION, THAT WAS COMFORTABLE REFERENCING PAST BOWIE TRIUMPHS.

THE ETERNAL

BLACKSTAR (2016)

As the world celebrated his return, we missed his coded farewell.

An ending that felt like another new beginning. A swansong full of life and motion. Proof that Bowie was, in more ways than one, fearless. A fascinating riddle to which the answer, we discovered to our horror, was that David Bowie was dying. Before all that became apparent, though, there was a brief window during which Blackstar was simply a strange and thrilling album from an artist whose creative energy seemed undiminished.

The clues were there in his first release after the self-referencing The Next Day. Appended to 2014's Nothing Has Changed compilation, Sue (Or In A Season Of Crime) was a roiling stew of murder, sexual jealousy, '90s drum'n'bass and big-band jazz, unlike anything he'd ever done. Sue and its brutish demo B-side 'Tis A Pity She Was A Whore would reappear, in new forms, on Blackstar, one of the most surprising LPs of his career. "This is fresh. This came from a different space," said producer Tony Visconti, who began working on other demos that summer. "Nothing was done recalling the past."

On the recommendation of jazz composer Maria Schneider, the saxophonist Donny McCaslin had performed on the first version of Sue in June 2014. When Bowie saw McCaslin's quartet play in Manhattan he was so inspired that he went home and wrote 'Tis A Pity She Was A Whore, then emailed McCaslin to offer the group work (other musicians who got the call included LCD Soundsystem's James Murphy).

On their first day in New York's The Magic Shop studio last January, Bowie told McCaslin, "I have no idea how this is going to go. Let's just go for it and see what happens."

The first Bowie album without a picture of the singer on the cover, Blackstar was a delightful enigma. No two songs sounded the same. Its seven distinct entities, weaving between art-rock and jazz, autobiography and geopolitics, electronica and musical theatre, were united only by their boldness. The past poked through occasionally: the stars on the sleeve and the Clockwork Orange argot on Girl Loves Me nodded to his glam-rock days; Lazarus sprang from The Man Who Fell To Earth, the same novel that had given Bowie his defining screen role; the long, shape-shifting title track inevitably brought to mind Station To Station. But the overall impression was one of liberation and unquenchable curiosity. Visconti said he and Bowie were inspired by Kendrick Lamar's To Pimp A Butterfly: "He threw everything on there. The goal was to avoid rock'n'roll."

The final word: Bowie's "parting gift", Blackstar.

It had an idiosyncratic sense of fun, too. According to keyboard player Jason Lindner, "The only instruction we received was: 'Have a good time'." For all the LP's aura of cryptic dread, Bowie seemed to have obeyed his own command. Transcending all expectations, he had never sounded more free.

By withholding news of his cancer from everyone outside his inner circle, Bowie ensured that the acclaim Blackstar received was sincere rather than sentimental. But it can never be heard in the same way again.

NO ARTIST COULD CONTRIVE A FINER EXIT.

That first line in Lazarus, "Look up here, I'm in heaven," feels too on-the-nose. That black star on the front looks like a cosmic gravestone. The lyrics of I Can't Give Everything Away (how true that claim turned out to be) sound like his last words to his audience: "Seeing more and feeling less/Saying no but meaning yes/This is all I ever meant/That's the message that I sent."

That's one way of looking at it, as a coded long goodbye, coloured by death. Another way is to find its spiky vivacity even more remarkable. According to the official statement, Bowie was diagnosed with cancer 18 months ago, around the time he recorded Sue and asked Visconti to come and work on some demos with him. He knew he was making his final album and he chose to make a record full of noise and mystery, with an obscure jazz quartet – the furthest he could get from a safe bet. He raged against the dying of the light. With saxophones.

After Bowie's death, Visconti said, "He made Blackstar for us, his parting gift." If so, the gift was to trust in his fans' intelligence, to refuse to pander to nostalgia and to remind anyone who cared about him that the whole point of Bowie's body of work was forward movement – to go for it and see what happens. That's the message that he sent.

So the sadness was relieved a little by the realisation that no artist could contrive a finer exit. Bowie performed one last reinvention, celebrated one last birthday, enjoyed one last flurry of love and admiration, and left the stage. His fans would have mourned his death whatever he'd released towards the end, but Blackstar was a glorious final reminder of how brilliantly he'd lived. *DORIAN LYNSKEY*

"He had never sounded more free": Bowie leaves us on a high.

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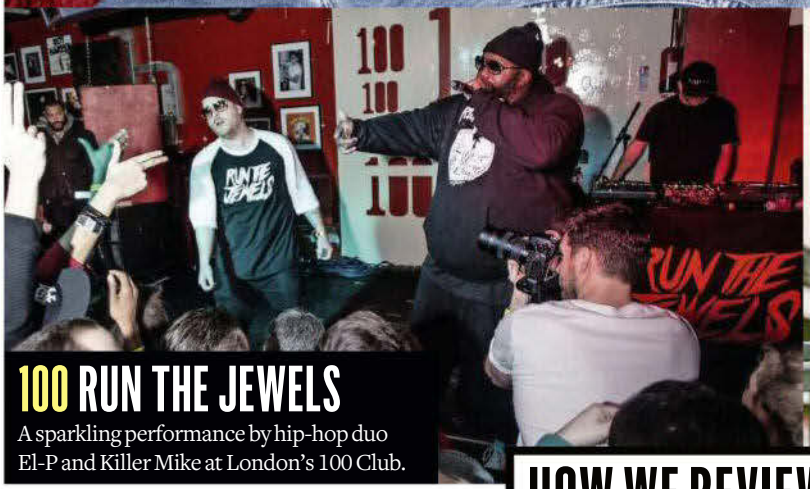
The Q Review

The World's Biggest & Best Music Guide

EDITED BY NIALL DOHERTY

104 THE 1975

"Brazen pop" and "arty pretension" abound on the Manchester quartet's second LP.



100 RUN THE JEWELS

A sparkling performance by hip-hop duo El-P and Killer Mike at London's 100 Club.

116 JACK GARRATT

So, is the much-touted R&B-pop singer's debut album any good?

HOW WE REVIEW

The Q Review is the definitive music guide. Its hand-picked writers are the undisputed experts in their fields, and they rigorously adhere to Q's world-famous star-rating system.

★★★★★ **CLASSIC**
Buy this now! Essential for any collection.

★★★★ **EXCELLENT**
Rest assured, satisfaction is guaranteed.

★★★ **GOOD**
Good within its field, but perhaps not for everyone.

★★ **FAIR**
For die-hard fans. Even they may be disappointed.

★ **POOR**
Move along, there's nothing of interest here.

ED MASON

"It's usually only the greats that play here...": Noel Gallagher's High Flying Birds, Royal Albert Hall, London, 10 December, 2015.

THE ROYAL TREATMENT

A helping of Oasis classics lifts the Albert Hall's lid.

NOEL GALLAGHER'S HIGH FLYING BIRDS

ROYAL ALBERT HALL, LONDON
THURSDAY, 10 DECEMBER, 2015
★★★★

Deep in the underbelly of the Royal Albert Hall, pre-match nerves have gripped Noel Gallagher's dressing room. The man himself, his regulation snug-fit leather jacket zipped up against the indoor chill, holds two printed setlists, one in each hand. In the left: one for his opening, early-evening set tonight, which includes the best bits from his semi-acoustic gig at London's BBC Radio Theatre earlier in the week. In the right, his main electric setlist, mostly drawn from his two latter-day solo albums with the High Flying Birds. "Oh shit," he observes, glancing at the first one, "it's all Oasis. How am I gonna follow that?" He glances around the room, looking for encouragement. "Am I overcooking this?" he wonders.

The Albert Hall – Queen Victoria's concert-hall gift to her hubby – is always an extraordinary gig, he says. "You never generally come here to see shit indie music, know what I mean? I've seen Donovan, Ennio Morricone, Paul Weller... It's usually only the greats that play here, so you have to treat it as a special thing." With that in mind, tonight's show was slotted in as a triumphant finale to Gallagher's exceptional 2015. The year brought another chart-topping (not to mention, Q Award-winning) album, as well as tours that definitively established him as both an arena-filler, and a festival headliner. Even for the master tunesmith, whose early repertoire reduced the 125,000-capacity Knebworth to one supersized worshipful choir in 1996 (twice!), these achievements are not inconsiderable, because he's made them solo, without recourse to any fraternal bridge-building with a certain heart-throb little bro of his, named Liam.

Yet, Gallagher, Sr still feels the dying twinges of self-doubt about his ability to succeed at the »

SIMON SARIN

In the heat of the moment: Noel and his High Flying Birds fire up the Albert Hall.

Full house: the Crouch End Festival Chorus and the High Flying Birds join Noel for the evening's main set.

"WHEN I PLAY THESE OLD SONGS, THEY STILL FEEL LIKE NEW TO ME." NOEL GALLAGHER

top level, outside of Oasis, and matching them in his public's affections. Since he debuted the High Flying Birds onstage in October 2011, however, he's made canny work of reclaiming some of his old band's crown jewels, each time out nibbling away a couple more – after all, he wrote them.

"When I play these old songs," he says, picking a few off tonight's setlist, "like Listen Up, D'Yer Wanna Be A Spaceman? and Cast No Shadow, they still feel like new to me, because Oasis never overplayed them – in fact, we rarely played them at all, so I kind of fall right back in love with them."

It feels good, scrubbing up these lost treasures?

"You're halfway through Listen Up," he says, his familiar cocky smirk returning, "and you get to the chorus, and you think, 'What the fucking hell was I thinking of, putting that out as a B-side?' And what kind of lunacy was going on at that record label *[ie, Alan McGee's Creation]*, when somebody said, 'We need a B-side now', and I'm like, 'I've got this song', and they reply, 'OK, *that'll do*!' You're thinking, 'Wow, man – and I just knocked this out in half an hour.' Insane!"

Onstage a couple of hours later, at 8pm prompt, the lighting's sheepishly dim as Noel launches a gentler take on one such cast-off – his long-serving party-starter, (It's Good) To Be Free. On the barstool next to him strums Gem Archer, ex-Oasis and now ex-Beady Eye, who was re-hired, Noel revealing earlier, "for rehearsals for the BBC thing, and it was like putting on a really comfy pair of desert boots." Behind them, are arranged most of the touring 'Birds rhythm section, including ivory-tinkler Mike Rowe, plus three horn players, subtly parping.

The mood would be subdued, befitting of a support act, only it's not – the auditorium's packed, and everyone's going totally crackers. In recent days, Gallagher enraged Adele's fans by branding her 25 album "music for fucking grannies". The air of seated respectability about his own introductory performance is, however, just a veneer. He's right – Listen Up is massive, but each successive song ramps up the euphoria inside the Albert Hall's glowing toilet bowl. Sad Song, once the maudlin bonus track on the vinyl of Definitely Maybe, is electrified with a rockin' lilt, and two of his ultimate Oasis soul-wrenchers, Slide Away and Cast No Shadow, have the inhabitants of all three tiers of boxes baying the words, arms wide, entreating higher decibel levels from their opposites across the room.

Seven straight Oasis songs, then Wonderwall, lift public spirits through the inverted magic-mushroom roof – and it's only 8.35pm. Adding to the excitement, David Beckham has taken a central seat, facing the stage. Paul Weller's here, too. But are Noel's fears justified? Will the whole night go pear-shaped from here?

On returning 40 minutes later, the grown-man Gallagher's solo songbook, now comfortably embedded in the psyche, squares up fabulously. Everybody's On The Run, with regular guitarist Tim Smith replacing Archer, and the 20-person Crouch End Festival Chorus also in tow, is a simmering inaugural epic, no less soulful than Slide Away. Third up, In The Heat Of The Moment has all those tiers now busting the requisite Glitter-Gallagher disco-trousers moves, while soon thereafter Riverman, with its out-and-proud pair of sax solos, borders on jazz-rock but in a way that miraculously borders on the orgasmic.

During Chasing Yesterday's propulsive You Know We Can't Go Back, Noel, visibly vibing on dispensing such disparate grooves, pirouettes a full 360 degrees into the guitar break. In a non-material sense, he's flying. He can't put a foot wrong.

Setlist

Semi-Acoustic

(It's Good) To Be Free

D'Yer Wanna Be A Spaceman?

Listen Up

Sad Song

Slide Away

Cast No Shadow

The Importance Of Being Idle

Wonderwall

Full electric

Everybody's On The Run

Lock All The Doors

In The Heat Of The Moment

Fade Away

Riverman

The Death Of You And Me

You Know We Can't Go Back

Champagne Supernova

Dream On

Talk Tonight

Whatever

The Mexican

If I Had A Gun

Digsy's Dinner

Half The World Away

The Masterplan

AKA... What A Life!

Don't Look Back In Anger

As he starts to dip into the Oasis honey pot, a choired-up Champagne Supernova, '94 Yuletide belter Whatever and even a hurtle through dear old Digsy's Dinner, with its line about "the best years of our life", bring indescribable joy – beautifully arranged, seamless with the whole.

Just when the deluge of melodies old and new seems like it can't get any more in-the-moment, our man drops a casual Half The World Away. Somehow, a crap John Lewis cover version has revitalised another of his tunes, with credibility intact. And so it goes on, AKA... What A Life! ably armwrestling the mighty Don't Look Back In Anger up to the curfew.

Afterwards, Gallagher is irrepressible, and rightly so. "When you play here," he says, "it's usually for the Teenage Cancer Trust, which is an older crowd. But that was amazing!"

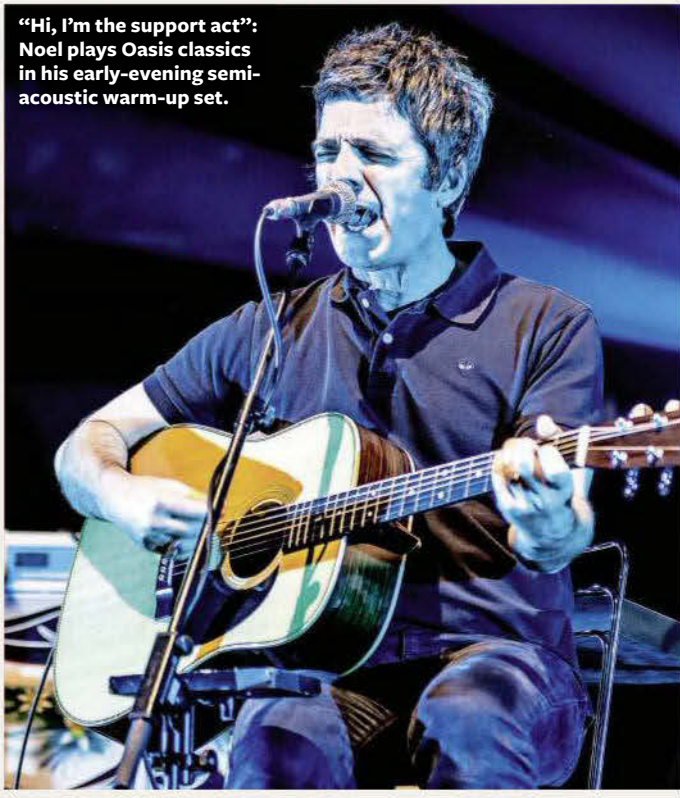
Did you know Beckham was popping down?

"Not until earlier. He called and said he was in town. I was like *[sneakily]*, 'Funnily enough, I'm actually going to the Albert Hall tonight.' 'Who's on?' 'Well, haha, I am!'"

The pair became reacquainted last March on The Graham Norton Show, and recently dined together at an upscale New York pizzeria.

"So, Beckham's on the guestlist," Noel continues, "and then all the girls from my office – there's about eight of them – all turn up looking like they're going to the Oscars. Fucking, like, 'What have you lot come dressed as?' 'Oh no no no, we've not dressed up especially!' 'Come on, you don't fucking go to the shops looking like that, all in miniskirts and ball gowns.' They'll be trying to sidle up to him for selfies, as we speak..."

Later, Gallagher himself will force a selfie out of Becks, in front of a giant Man City flag, with the former United star putting on a comic grimace. Noel says his next album is already well underway. "I've got too many songs," he says. "If it was the '70s, I'd be making a triple album." On current form, maybe we'd forgive him even that. *ANDREW PERRY*



"Hi, I'm the support act": Noel plays Oasis classics in his early-evening semi-acoustic warm-up set.

DIAMONDS IN THE ROUGH

The world's most exciting – and "immature" – rap duo shine at an intimate club show.

They are the champions: Killer Mike (left) and El-P backstage.

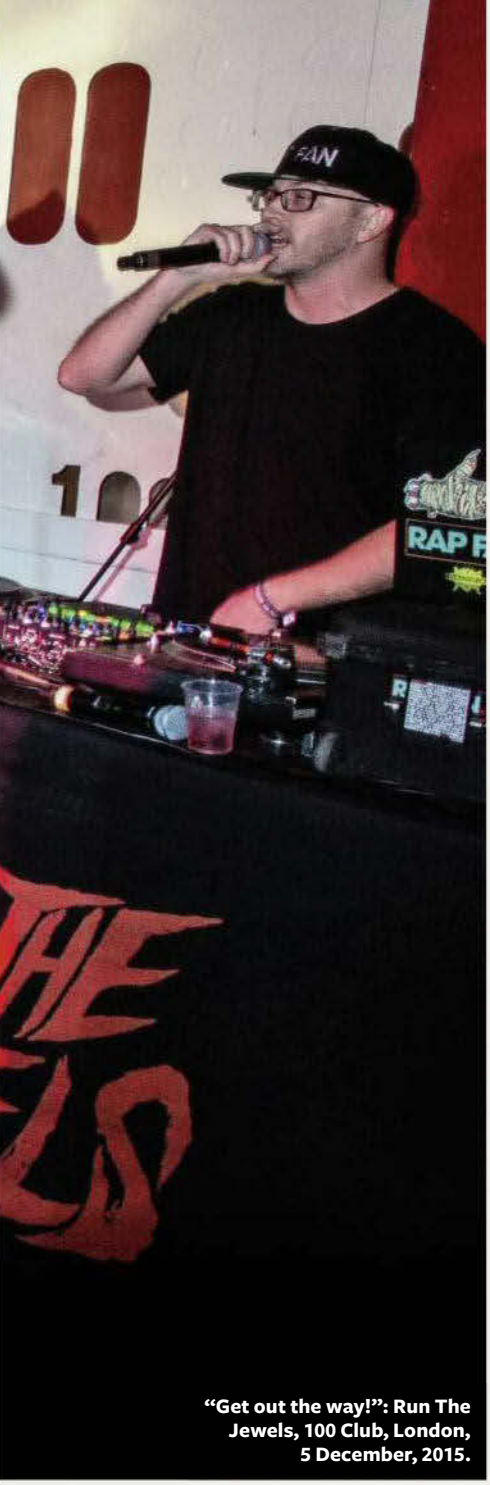
RUN THE JEWELS

100 CLUB, LONDON, SATURDAY, 5 DECEMBER, 2015

★★★★

There are few hip-hop acts who come onstage to We Are The Champions and even fewer for whom the opening lines ring so true. "I've paid my dues/Time after time..." are words that might have been written for Run The Jewels. Both members of the duo, Killer Mike and El-P, saw their time come and seemingly go a decade or so back – Mike as "an OutKast sidekick", as he puts it, and El-P as rapper-producer for underground icons Company Flow. Both aged 40, they're now enjoying an extraordinary late flourish that took their second LP Run The Jewels 2 into the Billboard charts and has seen the pair become one of the world's most exciting live rap acts.

"We are both so completely immature that we're relevant at our age – it's quite a feat when you think about it," says El-P, Brooklyn native Jaime Meline, in the matchbox that passes for the 100 Club dressing room shortly before tonight's show. "Anyone who hears the records knows we're not coming out on some shit other than, 'We're gonna bust your fucking ass'," interrupts Killer Mike, born Michael Render in Atlanta, Georgia, a month after his bandmate. "I don't give a fuck



"Get out the way!": Run The Jewels, 100 Club, London, 5 December, 2015.

All that glitters: Killer Mike on the, er, mic.

"I DON'T GIVE A FK WHO'S BEFORE, WHO'S AFTER. WE SHOW UP AND SHOW OUT. THAT'S WHAT IT'S ABOUT." KILLER MIKE**

who's before, who's after. We show up and show out. That's what it's about."

They carry the whiff of stoners. When Q arrives backstage, they're returning from one of many outdoor weed breaks and the scent clings to them so heavily the security man repeatedly interrupts our conversation, sticking his head round the door to make sure no one's smoking. "I'm more of a marijuana kind of person," says Mike as El mixes him a "damn, that's strong!" vodka and lemon. "I like to smoke that shit, cook it, whatever, I don't give a fuck. If not for being afraid of needles, I'd be mainlining that shit right now."

Amid it all, though, they are also deadly serious. Run The Jewels' breakthrough stemmed from their darkest hour, in November 2014, the night a Missouri grand jury decided not to prosecute the policeman who killed Ferguson teenager Michael Brown. A video of Render, himself the son of a policeman, raging through the tears onstage in St Louis, just a few miles from the riot-torn streets of Ferguson, went viral. It reminded those longing for hip-hop with political fire that they didn't have to wax nostalgic about Public Enemy and Ice Cube (Render has been making such records since 2006 and his I Pledge Allegiance To The Grind series). He has since written op-eds, spoken on race, police brutality and social issues at universities, and almost a year to the day from the St Louis gig, introduced Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders at a rally in his hometown of Atlanta.

From Run The Jewels' opening self-titled track, the 100 Club is a mass of bouncing bodies, flailing limbs and flying beer. El-P, shortish and stocky, is the more intense, all sharp movements and face thrust forwards when he raps. Killer Mike, meanwhile, is sheer presence: he stands six foot plus and grows outwards, a man mountain with a volcanic voice to more than match. The pair may demand the breakneck energy of a punk show ("If you're at the front and not prepared to dance, get the fuck out the way cos it's about to go off!" hollers Mike, introducing a vicious Close Your Eyes (And Count To Fuck)), but with their beanie hats, shades, near-telepathy and good-natured jousting, they carry the air of stoner comedy stars. "Run The Jewels is the ultimate destination of the dick you drew on your schoolbook when you were a kid," El-P tells the crowd.

Tonight the politics is left to El-P, who introduces Lie, Cheat, Steal with a nihilistic rant about its soul-sapping corruption, delivered not with fury but the ironic smile of a man who's read too many comic books. "I'm the guy who successfully doesn't pay attention *[to politics]* because of my burning seething contempt for mankind," he jokes backstage. "We don't feel the responsibility, we just feel the tug of history and of life and we can't separate it from our art," he adds, turning momentarily serious. The two strands – social activism and stoner humour – come together most visibly on Meow The Jewels, a remix album composed of cat samples to raise funds for the victims of police brutality. "If this record goes diamond all the money still goes to that," said Render earlier. "And El and I go, 'What a fucking mistake we have made.'"

Onstage, Mike tries to claw back some of that money lost to good causes. "You can hear literally any song you want for $50,000," he tells those shouting requests. They get a tune about two guys who endured some hard times but still came through regardless, called A Christmas Fucking Miracle. On a mild December night in London, there seems no better place for it. *STEVE YATES*

Setlist

Run The Jewels
Oh My Darling Don't Cry
Blockbuster Night Pt. 1
Banana Clipper
DDFH
Sea Legs
Close Your Eyes (And Count To Fuck)
Pew Pew Pew
Lie, Cheat, Steal
Early
All Due Respect
Love Again
Get It
A Christmas Fucking Miracle

ED MASON

"Never pander to your audience": Deerhunter get wiggy, Warsaw, Brooklyn, 9 December, 2015.

BANG FOR THE BUCK

Bradford Cox's indie outliers offer "a transcendental experience" with every ticket.

DEERHUNTER

WARSAW, BROOKLYN
WEDNESDAY, 9 DECEMBER, 2015
★★★★

For most bands, a Christmas show in New York is the perfect excuse to cut loose at the end of a long tour. Not, however, for Deerhunter's Bradford Cox. "It was just another show," he tells Q the day after his band's sold-out performance at Manhattan's Irving Plaza. Tonight they will play another New York show, across the East River at Brooklyn venue Warsaw. "I certainly didn't party afterwards," says Cox. "I like to be alone. I just wanted to get back to my reading."

These Atlantan oddballs have been retooling the indie-rock rule book ever since 2005 debut Turn It Up Faggot. However, after a decade and seven albums of desolate alienation that has incorporated shoegazing (2007's Cryptograms) and garage rock (2013's Monomania), their progress came to an abrupt halt in 2014 when Cox, who suffers from debilitating genetic disorder Marfan syndrome, was hospitalised for three months following a car accident. Typically, where other songwriters might have wallowed in introspection, Cox saw it as an epiphany.

Inspired by unlikely sources, including Tom Petty and Tears For Fears, 2015's Fading Frontier is both his most personal and most accessible record to date (it has already matched sales of Monomania). After a decade on the margins, it also possesses a crossover appeal which Cox, an assiduous observer of pop culture, clearly craves.

Rummaging through a sports bag

Deer-ly beloved: (from left) Josh McKay, Bradford Cox, Moses Archuleta and Lockett Pundt.

crammed with left-field tour diversions (a boxset of cult film director John Cassavetes, art books on Dutch painter Willem de Kooning and German dramatist Peter Weiss), the 33-year-old is the archetypal indie outsider.

Dressed in a thrift store ensemble of stonewash jeans, oversized yellow coat and a moleskin baseball cap, he's also incredibly thin. His physical frailty, however, masks the cast-iron mental toughness of an old-fashioned showman.

"I'm an entertainer, there's nothing else in my job description," he says, gripping Q by the forearm. "When I was 16, seeing bands like Sonic Youth and Stereolab helped me through a really rough patch. I want to zap those wide-eyed kids in the audience the same way. It's reciprocal. People ask me why I'm asexual, but I get the same climactic sexual energy I would from a relationship by playing shows. Not literally, of course..."

So determined is Cox to provide value for money that he performs twice each night – the first half of the evening with his electronic spin-off outfit, Atlas Sound. "It's a transaction," he says, clutching a knee to his chest. "People pay good money to see us, and in return I try to offer a transcendental experience."

By 9pm, Warsaw, a lovingly preserved Polish Community Centre unchanged since the 1930s, is chock-a-block with Williamsburg hipsters relishing the opportunity to see Deerhunter in suitably quirky surroundings. However, after an hour of electronic noodling with Atlas Sound, the loudest cheer comes when Cox exits, declaring: "Get ready for some down-home honky tonk rock'n'roll!" It seems like the cue for some of the old-school showmanship Cox had talked of earlier. However, when he reappears with his bandmates 10 minutes later, still in thrift store duds, he embarks on a mood dampening rendition of Desire Lines from 2010's Halcyon Digest, sung by guitarist Lockett Pundt.

While breezy renditions of Fading Frontier stand-outs Breaker and Duplex Planet get heads nodding, it's only when he delivers a waspish digression about Uber cabs culminating in him scowling, "I hate venture capitalists!" that the crowd relax, reassured that Cox is still as irascible as ever. It's a turning point, after which Cox's promise of a transcendental experience finally takes shape.

An emotionally charged Living My Life is a shiver-down-the-spine moment, while a triple whammy of Rainwater Cassette Exchange, All The Same and Take Care only act as a prelude to a climactic Nothing Ever Happened. With the stage bathed in electric blue light, Cox leads the band on a trippy 10-minute wig-out worthy of Spiritualized, cradling his guitar as the song builds into a bone-rattling wall of white noise. After such a sonic catharsis, encores of sublime space lullabies Cover Me (Slowly) and Agoraphobia, both from 2008's Microcastle, become mass sing-alongs. They leave a rapturous Warsaw tingling all over, before the band exit on a typically obtuse note with a sprawling, feedback-drenched Strange Lights from 2007's Cryptograms.

Backstage, Q puts it to Cox that while it was a mesmerising show, it certainly wasn't "down-home honky tonk rock'n'roll". "You must never pander to your audience," he says, flashing a smile which suggests Deerhunter's entry into the mainstream may not happen any time soon. "You have to trust the artist, and go with them on their journey."

And with that, he says his farewells, gathers up his books and heads to the tourbus. He's got some reading to catch up on. *PAUL MOODY*

Setlist

- Desire Lines
- Breaker
- Duplex Plant
- Revival
- Don't Cry
- Living My Life
- Rainwater Cassette Exchange
- All The Same
- Take Care
- Nothing Ever Happened
- Ad Astra
- Cover Me (Slowly)
- Agoraphobia
- Strange Lights

"I GET CLIMACTIC SEXUAL ENERGY BY PLAYING SHOWS. NOT LITERALLY..." BRADFORD COX

The outsider's outsider: Bradford Cox gets aroused.

GUY EPPEL

THIS MONTH

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THE WONDER YEARS

The UK's most exciting young band mix hooks and atmosphere on their big statement.

THE 1975

I LIKE IT WHEN YOU SLEEP, FOR YOU ARE SO BEAUTIFUL YET SO UNAWARE OF IT

DIRTY HIT, OUT 26 FEBRUARY

Matt Healy spent much of the period following his band's breakthrough debut split between debating the perils of celebrity culture and diving right in. As the four-piece from outer Manchester toured the world, the frontman had a brief romance with Taylor Swift, drank too much, took too many drugs and kept putting off that inevitable hangover. By the beginning of 2015, it had all caught up with him and the singer found himself struggling to knuckle down and turn his focus towards the band's second album.

You can understand why he might have been a bit dazed. It had been a whirlwind two years for Healy, guitarist Adam Hann, bassist Ross MacDonald and drummer George Daniel. A small hardcore online fanbase had grown around the band's early EPs, but the sheer pop immediacy of their track Chocolate propelled them into the mainstream. By the time their self-titled album went straight into the charts at Number 1 in September 2013, they had already sold out a UK tour that included three nights at London's Brixton Academy. Their blend of sophisticated indie-rock, '80s-style synth-pop and nocturnal R&B had struck big.

Tribalism doesn't exist in the minds of young fans in the way it once did and The 1975 make music that reflects the way their crowd listens to it. They connect disparate artists in a manner that perhaps only Coldplay do: they supported The Rolling Stones, took indie newcomers such as Wolf Alice and Swim Deep on tour with them, wrote with One Direction and got drunk with Ed Sheeran and Ellie Goulding.

This second album pulls all those different factions into its world. It perfectly balances brazen pop choruses with arty pretension, although that's not taking into account the fact its ridiculous title causes a hefty swing into the latter category. Produced in Los Angeles by Healy and Daniel alongside Arctic Monkeys collaborator Mike Crossey, it's old

MATT HEALY IS A MAGNETIC PRESENCE THROUGHOUT, BY TURNS COCKY, MELANCHOLIC, CHARISMATIC AND FUNNY.

The 1975 (Matt Healy, front centre): "perfectly balancing brazen pop choruses with arty pretension."

school in the sense that it's 17 songs long and none of them are bonus tracks. In essence, it's two records folded into one: one made up of supremely hooky pop songs and the other of atmospheric, densely-layered soundscapes. For the first few listens, it's the catchy ones that really stand out. Somebody Else is their best song yet, a pulsing R&B ballad armed with a shoulder-pad shimmy. The Sound is a roof-down banger with Euro-pop piano and a drunk-at-sunset chorus; and She's American resembles Foals soundtracking an '80s Brat Pack film, possibly one about a naive young man moving to the big city and falling in love with his boss's wife.

Gradually, the slower songs reveal themselves. The title track is sweeping electronica that gently builds to a euphoric beat, like Kid A-era Radiohead reworked by Jamie xx, and Lostmyhead adds an orchestral uplift to swirling synths and dreamy vocals.

Healy is a magnetic presence throughout, by turns cocky, melancholic, charismatic and funny. "Your eyes were full of regret/You took a picture of your salad and put it on the internet," he sings on the slow-dance glide of A Change Of Heart, retaining a sense of humour in the face of what sounds like a mini-breakdown. His existential crisis pops up again on the excellent The Ballad Of Me And My Brain, a groovy little number about trying to relocate his mind. His love of Mike Skinner's irreverent but affecting lyrics shines throughout, especially when he equates his carnal pursuits to the fall of the Greek economy on the soulful Loving Someone.

They do overstretch themselves a little, though, and the acoustic duo of songs at the end slightly break the spell of what's gone before. But I Like It When You Sleep... is as ambitious an album as you will hear from a young British group and they mostly pull it off. They could have played it safe but it's an album that marks The 1975 out as a truly special band. Matt Healy might have put himself through the wringer along the way but it was all worth it in the end. ★★★★

NIALL DOHERTY

Download: Somebody Else | The Ballad Of Me And My Brain | She's American | A Change Of Heart | Lostmyhead | UGH!

Sleep Cycle

Three LPs that The 1975's new record harks back to...

Tears For Fears
Songs From The Big Chair
FONTANA, 1984

The 1975 evoke the same blend of incessant hooks and arty grandeur as the Bath duo's hit second album, where sinister themes and unsettling melancholy were buried in uplifting pop songs. ★★★★

Múm
Finally We Are No One
FATCAT, 2002

The electronic grooves and stirring soundscapes of the Icelanders' second LP sound a lot like I Like It...'s more atmospheric moments. ★★★★

Radiohead
Kid A
PARLOPHONE, 2000

Thom Yorke's response to OK Computer's success was to remove a sense of himself on the follow-up. Matt Healy underwent a similar process of self-examination for I Like It... ★★★★

BARRY ADAMSON

KNOW WHERE TO RUN

CENTRAL CONTROL, OUT 19 FEBRUARY

The haunted cineaste's ninth.

As a member of Magazine and The Bad Seeds, and a contributor to Oliver Stone and David Lynch film soundtracks, Barry Adamson has often broadcast his affinity with tortured individuals at breaking point. This has found raw expression in his solo work, and Know Where To Run does not deviate from the script. From the opening jazz-noir splurge of In Other Worlds to the frenzied murder frame-up of Cine City and the manic mood swings of indie rocker Up In The Air, we're plugged into a world of sin, guilt and revenge. It sounds lavish too, with Dylan-esque laments, Elmer Bernstein-style hypnagogic suites and, best of all, closing confession Evil Kind, which comes across like a lurid Bond title sequence in song form. ★★★★

IAN HARRISON

Download: Evil Kind | Cine City | Up In The Air

ANIMAL COLLECTIVE

PAINTING WITH

DOMINO, OUT 16 FEBRUARY

Baltimore experimentalists' 10th.

When Animal Collective hit their commercial peak with Merriweather Post Pavilion in 2009, they might have been expected to settle in for the ride. Here was a band renowned for being innovative and difficult in equal measure suddenly hitting on tunes you could whistle without being able to pat your head and rub your stomach simultaneously. But Painting With confirms what Merriweather's follow-up suggested – that their blend of awkward harmonies and skittery melodies is not for taming. The band, stripped back to a trio in the absence of founding member Deakin, have compared it to the Ramones' debut. But if the absence of slow-builds and ambient drones makes for more succinct tunes, they're still no snappier. Choruses won't be bellowed, the air won't be punched, devotees will likely be delighted. ★★★

STEVE YATES

Download: Natural Selection | On Delay | Recycling

APPLEWOOD ROAD

APPLEWOOD ROAD

GEARBOX, OUT NOW

Trio bask in Nashville's country vibes.

Australian-raised, UK-based Emily Barker is a prolific talent, flitting from her solo recordings to collaborations with the Red Clay Halo and Vena Portae, composing film and TV

soundtracks, and her touring mini-venue Folk In A Box. Applewood Road is her latest project, an all-female trio with fellow singer-songwriters Amber Rubarth and Amy Speace. Written and recorded in Nashville, where the three first met, it's a stunning country showcase of three gorgeous but markedly different voices. The key to its success is that it never runs too sweet. For every ounce of sugar, such as the title track, there's a salty, lusty counterbalance – Honey Won't You, for instance, or the sourness of the banjo on Sad Little Tune. It sets them beautifully in the tradition of strong, sad, deep-loving country women. ★★★★
LAURA BARTON
Download: Honey Won't You | Sad Little Tune | My Love Grows

PETE AVES
SEE HOW
STRESS TESTED, OUT 5 FEBRUARY
Sometime High Llamas guitarist's first solo album since 2007.

Since his last album, Pete Aves has been consumed by depression and divorce, and spent a period of time labouring on a building site. He's emerged stronger, however, if not over-endowed with the spirit of forgiveness. The scars surface on this understated but always adult record ("You bury the truth in a shallow grave/ Anger rolls off you in waves," he croons to his ex-wife on The Complainant), but Aves's guitar twinkles across these impossibly catchy tunes and his voice's warmth masks its sometimes barbed content. His twins sing backing vocals on a version of Pharrell Williams's Happy, which sounds anything but, but there's also Cold Llamas, the irresistible, wry touring tale of a breakdown (mechanical rather than psychological) in North Dakota. Catharsis has rarely sounded so sweet. ★★★★
JOHN AIZLEWOOD
Download: Cold Llamas | Happy | The Complainant | God Bless The Poor

SARAH BLASKO
ETERNAL RETURN
MVKA, OUT NOW
Emotive Aussie's melodies shine brightest on yearning fifth.

An art-pop all-rounder, Sarah Blasko is Australia's missionary-raised "queen of fragile" and rethinks her style with every album. She bobbed on oceanic orchestration for her fourth having incorporated a saw among the beguiling eccentricities on her third. Here Blasko heads for Eurythmically-inclined synth-pop circa 1983. In such a scaled-down soundscape, the clockwork of melody, key and so on is more exposed. So too is Blasko's heart, almost visibly pumping through paper-thin emotional skin, with her me-you lyrics prone to the common lovelorn failing of deep feeling but shallow expression, abounding in abstracts such as "connection", "direction", "hope" and "hold" with little to grip the imagination. Yet the tunes hook you, and her achingly impassioned voice more than connects – it hits home. ★★★
MAT SNOW
Download: Better With You | Say What You Want | Without

Basia Bulat: "tantalisingly skewed."

JOHNNY BORRELL & ZAZOU
THE ATLANTIC CULTURE
ATLANTIC CULTURE, OUT 26 FEBRUARY
Ex-Razorlight genius-claimant discovers his inner folk gypsy.

Johnny Borrell has spent much of his career since Razorlight's commercial peak trying to prove that he was wasted on post-Britpop anthemicism. He sounds happier here, letting his inherent verbosity unfurl over looser, more raggle-taggle traditional idioms. While The Atlantic Culture abandons the serial conceit of 2013's commercially flatlining Borrell 1, it's very much its sequel, with the same jazzy Francophile combo, now officially credited, here teasing a less uptight songcraft from their bossman. Borrell's heroes are transparent: Leonard Cohen (cue rampant sax) and Bob Dylan, in his Rolling Thunder and Christian incarnations (witness the closing cover of derided biblical-reggae tune Man Gave Names To All The Animals). Given the trail of preposterous gestures behind him (interview self-aggrandizement; cruising into SXSW with Kirsten Dunst on the back of his Harley, etc), he'll probably assert he's bettered them all. Believe the tale, not the teller: this stuff's pretty decent. ★★★
ANDREW PERRY
Download: Swim Like A Star | We Cannot Overthrow | Bastida Cantina

BASIA BULAT
GOOD ADVICE
SECRET CITY, OUT 12 FEBRUARY
Folk also-ran blossoms into pop heavyweight.

Over three so-so albums of alt-folk, Toronto's Bulat's prospects of becoming a modern, autoharp-toting Fiona Apple have suffered from lyrics that bordered on saccharine. On 2013's Tall Tall Shadow, however, she made tentative steps towards a more indie-pop sound, a transition completed on Good Advice. It would be borderline sexist to suggest the responsibility for the shift rests with the producer, My Morning Jacket's Jim James, but something volcanic has occurred between the pair to create a wildly inventive yet mainstream sound that suits her lyrics far more than the naked world of the singer-songwriter. The result is a tantalisingly skewed artist in the vein of Björk and Bat For Lashes, driven by the drama only a break-up album can fuel and an energy that serves her talent with the setting it's been crying out for. ★★★★
ANDY FYFE
Download: La La Lie | Long Goodbye | The Garden | Someday Soon

BLACK CASINO AND THE GHOST
UNTIL THE WATER RUNS CLEAR
LUCKY MACHETE, OUT 12 FEBRUARY
Thought-provoking indie noir from Anglo-Italian outfit.

These North London oddballs are well named. A creeping sense of unease stalks every second of the follow-up to 2013's Some Dogs Think Their Name Is No, largely thanks to the extraordinary vocals of Elisa Zoot. Set against a velvety backdrop of crepuscular synths (Age Of Contagion), hypnotic grooves (Lucifer, Lucifer, Lucifer) and filthy garage guitars (Veggie Tarantula), she's by turns bewitching, beguiling and plain bonkers. Her anti-consumerist message is summed up by Soul Mall, where she sighs, "Are you allergic to the madness?" With Ariel Lerner's needling guitar lines providing additional menace, Black Casino are a safe bet for Wolf Alice fans seeking freakier thrills. ★★★★
PAUL MOODY
Download: Veggie Tarantula | Lucifer, Lucifer, Lucifer | Mr Puppeteer | Soul Mall

School Of Seven Bells: (from left, the late Benjamin Curtis, Alejandra Deheza). "SVIIB is a glorious memorial."

IN TRIBUTE

New York electronic-rock duo's fourth and final act draws beauty from tragedy.

SCHOOL OF SEVEN BELLS

SVIIB

FULL TIME HOBBY, OUT 12 FEBRUARY

Occasionally, the circumstances in which an album is made are so extreme, music and backstory are indivisible. That, unfortunately, is the case with SVIIB, a record released just over two years since one of its creators, Benjamin Curtis, died from T-cell lymphoblastic lymphoma, aged 35. It was left to the other half of School Of Seven Bells, Alejandra Deheza, to complete the recordings they had "about 80 per cent" finished in the fiercely productive summer of 2012. It was only after releasing their remarkable cover of Joey Ramone's I Got Knocked Down (But I'll Get Up), a track Curtis worked on from his hospital bed, that Deheza felt able to move to Los Angeles to work on the album with producer Justin Meldal-Johnsen (Paramore, M83).

It is, of course, impossible to listen to SVIIB without a terrible awareness of what was to come, and of what has been lost. Deheza, who was in a relationship with Curtis for five of the years they worked together, wrote these lyrics before the crushing news of his diagnosis, yet she had already chosen to tell the story of their life together. The poignancy that comes from delirious, plummeting love song Ablaze, or the valedictory This Is Our Time, is, naturally, unbelievably intense.

Yet while the knowledge of those things they couldn't control adds a heavy sadness to their super-saturated synth-pop, it is worth heralding those things Curtis and Deheza could and did control: the precise, unflinching lyrics, the meticulous, nuanced production, the emotional dynamic that smashes through the occasionally glassy surfaces of their earlier work. SVIIB is a memorial, yes, but it's a glorious one. ★★★★

VICTORIA SEGAL

Download: Ablaze | Open Your Eyes | This Is Our Time

Q&A School Of Seven Bells' Alejandra Deheza talks to Victoria Segal about SVIIB and her plans for the future.

Was there a moment when you realised you were ready to complete the album?

"It was when we filmed the video for I Got Knocked Down... in LA. I've been here a lot but I never got time to see the beautiful places round here, the mountains, the Joshua Tree or even the water. I know Benjamin and I always had been planning to go to the Joshua Tree and hang out and see what happened musically. Being there, I really did feel like he was there with me. The next step was to move to Los Angeles. I had been in touch with Justin *[Meldal-Johnsen, producer]* already."

What was your original vision for the record?

"To include every sound that we loved – our story. It was the best production Benjamin had ever done; he was working day and night. It was a magical time. We just hit this moment, we felt like we had to create as much as possible, it was this thing that had to happen. Maybe we knew, on some level. Two full-length records and an EP in the period of a year, it would have been insane, and that still wouldn't have been enough. It takes my breath away when I think about it. There's always something behind every dream or ambition and this gift we have of our intuition, we shouldn't question it. If we had thought, 'Maybe we should have a break', we wouldn't have had that record."

Will you keep making music?

"Most definitely. It's just who I am. I have to keep making things. It won't be School Of Seven Bells, though. That's Benjamin and Ally."

Elton John: "cheerily fierce."

ROCKING MAN

Clattering 33rd album from rejuvenated national treasure.

ELTON JOHN
WONDERFUL CRAZY NIGHT

MERCURY, OUT 5 FEBRUARY

For all that his profile has remained stellar and his touring schedule exhausting, after 2001's Songs From The West Coast, Elton John's subsequent albums have drifted by.

From its upbeat, smiley-Elton cover shot, Wonderful Crazy Night is both renewal and continuation. Like its predecessors, the Leon Russell collaboration The Union and 2013's The Diving Board, it's produced by the baron of Americana, T-Bone Burnett. It's a schmaltz-free zone, if we skip nimbly over A Good Heart and the brilliantly uncomplicated Tambourine. It's also a reassertion of Elton's '70s pomp, when he had seven consecutive US Number 1 LPs, and he's joined by touring band mainstays Nigel Olsson and Davey Johnstone for the first time since 2006's The Captain & The Kid.

The never-completely-dormant rocking Elton is resurrected. Indeed, he hasn't sounded this cheerily fierce since parts of 1983's Too Low For Zero. The tambourine-propelled Looking Up grooves like Philadelphia Freedom; Guilty Pleasure rattles like Saturday Night's Alright For Fighting and the title track suggests Burnett's work with John Mellencamp, were it not for lyricist Bernie Taupin's impish joy in eulogising the American way of life yet again and John's almost honky tonk piano swing.

Elton John will be 70 next year. He may have found familial peace and his place in pop history remains secure, but while Wonderful Crazy Night lacks a truly great Elton John song, he sounds more driven than he has in years. There's no stopping him. Thankfully. ★★★

JOHN AIZLEWOOD

Download: The Open Chord | Wonderful Crazy Night | Tambourine | I've Got 2 Wings

CHOIR OF YOUNG BELIEVERS
GRASQUE

GHOSTLY INTERNATIONAL, OUT 19 FEBRUARY

Subdued third from Danish indie auteur.

A decade into their career, Denmark's Choir Of Young Believers are regular chart-toppers at home, but engender only a flicker of awareness in the UK. Invariably, this comes via Hollow Talk, their theme tune for Nordic noir thriller The Bridge. That track, which opened their 2008 debut LP This Is For The White In Your Eyes, is full of rumbling intensity and explosive highs. As such, it's unlike anything on Grasque, a collection of electronics-based tunes, drifting, gently paced but surprisingly torpid. The album is directed, composed and in large part played by Jannis Noya Makrigiannis, whose restrained falsetto seems to occupy every second of space. Forget the choir, forget the believers – he's on his own with this one. ★★

STEVE YATES

Download: Jeg Ser Dig | Perfect Estocada

THE CULT
HIDDEN CITY

COOKING VINYL, OUT 5 FEBRUARY

Goth-metal veterans don't mess with trusted formula.

There's something satisfyingly reliable about cracking open a new Cult album. Like breaking out a new bottle of Jack Daniel's, you know exactly what you're going to get. And, from the tribal Comanche glam of Dark Energy onwards, Hidden City – the band's 10th – is Pure Cult. Which means Ian Astbury, his rich vocal more baritone nowadays, spins spiritual mumbo-jumbo and glorious nonsense about "Che Guevara in a garbage can", while Billy Duffy, one of Brit-rock's more underrated riffmakers, is pushed to the foreground by long-time producer Bob Rock. Deviations from Cult tradition are scarce: some Doorsy atmospherics on murder tale In Blood, some Stooges/Velvets staccato on Hinterland. But deviations aren't needed when you can enjoy Hidden City for what it is: a Cult record. ★★★

SIMON PRICE

Download: Hinterland | GOAT | Deeply Ordered Chaos

DE ROSA
WEEM

ROCK ACTION, OUT NOW

Third LP from re-formed Scottish trio.

From The Beta Band to King Creosote, there's something deeply elemental about Scottish bands that dabble in pastoral indie rock.

Larnarkshire's De Rosa are no exception, no matter how many keyboards they pile onto each subsequent release. Re-forming in 2012 as a three-piece following singer Martin John Henry's solo album The Other Half Of Everything, it's taken a while for new material to arrive, but when it's this good it's worth the wait. The melancholic tilt to Henry's lyrics, amplified by his unvarnished brogue, ebbs and flows like a drifting drizzle. They take on an urgency when lifted up by motorik beats, rinses of synth or delicate plucks and plinks of acoustic guitar and piano. For a marriage of new ideas with old traditions, look no further. ★★★

ANDY FYFE

Download: Spectres | Lanes | The Sea Cup | The Mute

DIIV

IS THE IS ARE

CAPTURED TRACKS, OUT 5 FEBRUARY

Second helping of iridescent shoegazing from Brooklyn band.

The chances are you've probably only heard about DIIV via the antics of their frontman Zachary Cole Smith. In September 2013, he and his girlfriend, Sky Ferreira, were busted on heroin possession charges. It was a story that largely eclipsed the band's well-received 2012 debut Oshin – a promising, glassy-eyed shoegazing record. This second album is Smith's attempt to shake the tabloid angle and return focus to the music. The result is a decent, post-millennial US indie rock record high on shimmering melody (Under The Sun) and distant Sonic Youth echoes (Sky Ferreira does her best Kim Gordon on Blue Boredom). While initially the effect of that is intoxicating, recalling why DIIV piqued so much interest in the first place, over 17 similar sounding tracks it becomes slightly more soporific. Mission not quite accomplished. ★★★

JAMES OLDHAM

Download: Out Of Mind | Dopamine | Incarnate Devil

EL GUINCHO

HIPERASIA

EVERLASTING, OUT 12 FEBRUARY

Latin maverick swaps global beats for digital trickery.

One of those talents whose ears seem attuned to the world at large, Pablo Díaz-Reixa has a refreshingly unfiltered approach to his creations. His 2008 debut Alegranza! earned him comparisons to both Animal Collective maverick Panda Bear and '60s tropicália. Follow-up Pop Negro didn't show the same exuberance, which may explain why his third LP again attempts something different, taking its cues from the abstract architecture of contemporary electronica. When it clicks, as on Rotu Seco's Latin-tinted R&B, the rhythmic flicker of Cómix or Parte Virtual's maximal funk, Díaz-Reixa's shape-shifting forms exert an angular fascination. Frustratingly, the tricksy production and Auto-Tuned vocals of the fragmented second-half tend to overwhelm the songs rather than enhance them. ★★★

RUPERT HOWE

Download: Rotu Seco | Cómix | Parte Virtual

FIELD MUSIC

COMMONTIME

MEMPHIS INDUSTRIES, OUT 5 FEBRUARY

Wearside prog-pop brothers' fifth.

Having previously saluted the exalted likes of Miles Davis, James Brown and Sly Stone, it was a shock when Prince tweeted his approval of multi-instrumentalist Sunderland siblings Field Music, and their sax-happy single The Noisy Days Are Over, back in November. But on reflection, you can see why he'd approve: recalling the seamless virtuosity of Steely Dan, XTC and Newcastle neighbours Prefab Sprout, Peter and David Brewis's proggy ruminations on belonging, relationships and the nebulous nature of consciousness feature impeccably arranged harmonies, guitar licks and lissomely jerky beats. As well as aural balms such as the smooth-rocking Disappointed, it's also alien (the ambient pop of Trouble At The Lights), warming (the orchestral The Morning Is Waiting) and relentless (Same Name tries and fails to tire itself on a treadmill). A triumph of irregular precision. ★★★★

IAN HARRISON

Download: The Noisy Days Are Over | Trouble At The Lights | Disappointed

FLOWERS

EVERYBODY'S DYING TO MEET YOU

FORTUNA POP!, OUT 12 FEBRUARY

Ethereal indie thrills from Walthamstow.

Formed with the intention of sounding like "early Madonna through a broken tape machine" by guitarist Sam Ayres, this London trio are yet to produce the sound of a lo-fi Madge. However, the follow-up to 2013's debut Do What You Want To, It's What You Should Do displays a growing pop sensibility. Frontwoman Rachel Kennedy's piercing soprano remains a thing of wonder, most notably on closer Bathroom Sink. The stand-out is Pull My Arm, which charts a way out of the dream-pop maze by matching their broken-amp aesthetic to a bubblegum melody worthy of Madonna herself. They are slowly getting closer to realising their original aim. ★★★

PAUL MOODY

Download: Pull My Arm | Bathroom Sink | Bitter Pill

THE INSIDE TRACK

THE SHORT GOODBYE

Some bands split and realise they've made a mistake. We should give the hasty re-formers a break, says VICTORIA SEGAL.

LCD Soundsystem's James Murphy: apologised for his band's swift reunion.

In February 2011, LCD Soundsystem performed a grand farewell concert at Madison Square Garden, captured by a 2012 documentary, Shut Up And Play The Hits, and 2014's live album The Long Goodbye. Even such a striking ending couldn't inhibit their impulse to re-form, however, with an appearance at Coachella and a new album promised this year. Addressing the disappointment fans might feel – particularly those who fought to attend that "final" gig – frontman James Murphy nobly wrote on the band's Facebook page that, "if you cared a lot about our band... and you feel betrayed now, then I completely understand that."

There is something unseemly about the speedy reunion, like leaving a party in a flurry of fond farewells, then returning to grab a bottle of wine. But LCD Soundsystem aren't the first act to display such hastiness, of course. Frank Sinatra held out two years after announcing his retirement in 1971. Elton John managed the same period of restraint. The Damned broke up in February 1978 and returned in April 1979.

> IF JAMES MURPHY'S TESTIMONY IS TO BE BELIEVED, THIS REUNION IS TRIGGERED BY CREATIVE IMPULSE.

There is an art to the comeback: you don't want to leave such a long gap that any coy Twitter clues about "exciting news" are met by indifferent silence, but reunions often require time and space to work. Nostalgia needs to mushroom, allowing career high-points to shine brighter and less felicitous moments to dim. Mystique is helpful, too: My Bloody Valentine never lost status because just the *idea* of Kevin Shields ever making a third album took on a mythical status. It also helps to have a new audience alongside the loyal fans. When The Velvet Underground reunited in 1992, they drew the generations who had repeatedly heard evidence of the band's huge influence, gathering an audience to match their myth.

There is, however, a heart and warmth to LCD Soundsystem's return, suggesting that despite their haste, there is no reason for them to repent. If Murphy's testimony is to be believed, this is a reunion triggered by creative impulse. That, rather than absence, is enough to make the heart grow fonder.

JOSEPHINE FOSTER

NO MORE LAMPS IN THE MORNING

FIRE, OUT 5 FEBRUARY

Colorado opera student turned folk evolutionist stops to take stock.

If there's been a defining characteristic to Josephine Foster's 15-year career, it's been her refusal to stand still. Past albums have focused on such disparate themes as reinterpretations of Spanish folk songs, reclusive American poet Emily Dickinson's writing and 19th-century German lieder, as well as one written for children. So it comes as something of a surprise that her 14th album comprises reworkings of old material, assisted by guitarist/husband Victor Herrero. For the most part the new versions feature just the pair's guitars and Foster's bewitching soprano, a voice that sounds as if it has been beamed in from the 1940s and is utterly unlike that of any of her peers. As her voice took centre stage on the original recordings too, the effect of stripping away almost everything else isn't that radical. Still, for anyone unfamiliar with Foster's work, this represents an excellent starting point. ★★★

PHIL MONGREDIEN

Download: Blue Roses | A Thimbleful Of Milk | No More Lamps In The Morning

FOXES

ALL I NEED

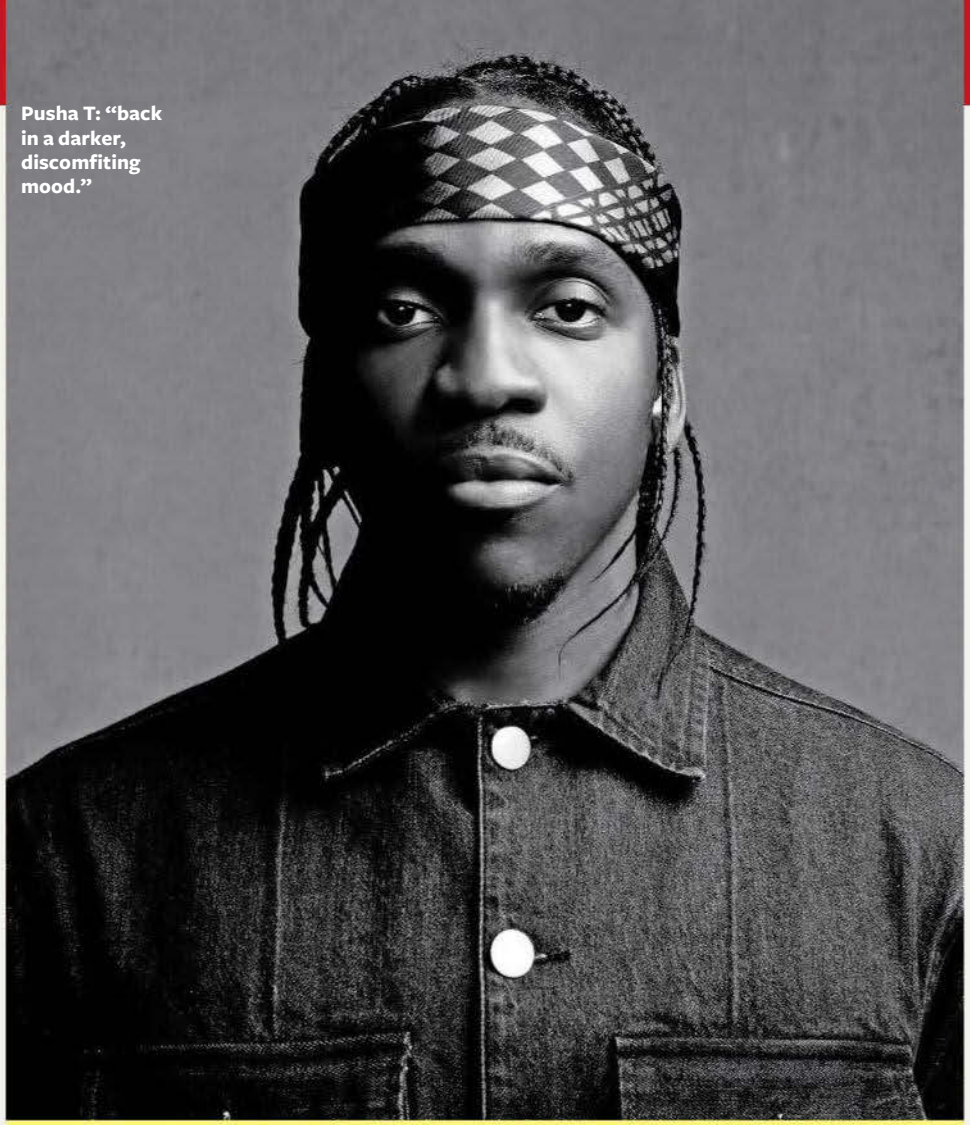
EPIC, OUT 5 FEBRUARY

Solent soloist makes a play for the big time.

Better known as Foxes, Louisa Allen says that this her stripped-down album. She surely has to be kidding. The Southampton singer's second effort is largely built on the sort of bombastic drums and pummelling pianos for which Florence Welch habitually reaches, and tracks such as Amazing and Money pack the sort of crescendos you could launch an ocean liner with. One doesn't expect innovation or experimentation from a Simon Fuller-backed, serial-collaborating, Debenhams-advertising, Doctor Who-guesting act such as Foxes, and neither do you get it: no obvious chord-change or go-to rhyming scheme goes unused. The production is pitched halfway twixt Adele and Bastille (whose frontman Dan Smith gets a co-writing credit on Better Love), and All I Need feels like the album that will kick Foxes up from the second tier to the A-lists and playlists. You wouldn't run screaming for the "Off" switch when it does. ★★★

SIMON PRICE

Download: Body Talk | Amazing | Money



Pusha T: "back in a darker, discomfiting mood."

A SHOVE SUPREME

Former Clipse man compellingly embraces the strange.

PUSHA T

KING PUSH: DARKEST BEFORE DAWN – THE PRELUDE

G.O.O.D. MUSIC, OUT NOW

Terrence Thornton spent the noughties turning his experiences as a cocaine dealer into absorbing hip-hop as one half of Virginia duo Clipse. Backed by some of The Neptunes' toughest beats, he delivered pin-sharp rhymes with the menace and steady pulse needed to survive that industry.

In 2013, his solo debut My Name Is My Name dealt similar tales but guest spots on other people's tracks broadened and brightened his remit. In the last few years, he's featured on club bangers from dance producers Yogi, Tiga and Axwell & Ingrosso, and even appeared as a disgruntled lover on a Pixie Lott single in 2011. If that suggested the 38-year-old was lightening up in middle age, this release puts him back him in a darker, discomfiting mood.

As an appetiser for this year's King Push album, he's siphoned off the 10 "hardest" tracks from the sessions – ones that pushed his blue-chip producers "out of their wheelhouse" – into this separate work. Timbaland serves up Retribution, which simultaneously glitters and lurches like a malfunctioning droid, and the eerie, stammering Untouchable. Q-Tip mints gothic boom-bap on F.I.F.A. and Kanye West loops a reverberating tambourine and pensive piano riff into the hypnotic M.P.A..

Against these strange, lopsided sounds, Pusha T is characteristically captivating, whether addressing drugs, the state of hip-hop or social injustices. It's a collision of classic rap skills and singular beats that makes this album outstanding and far more substantial than its "prelude" billing implies.

The title suggests that the forthcoming King Push, due in April, will contain more light than the murky shades here. Thornton himself promises it will be "hip-hop album of the year". If the morning after is as good as the night before, he won't be far off. ★★★★

MATT MASON

Download: Untouchable | M.P.A. | F.I.F.A.

GOTHIC CHICKEN
LIFT THE COBWEB VEIL
PINK HEDGEHOG, OUT 12 FEBRUARY

Meticulous homage to paisley pop's golden age.

Formed in the late '90s out of a desire to play obscure covers in their local pub, these Dorset crackpots have an interest in Brit psychedelia bordering on the fetishistic. Having spent a decade tinkering with these lysergically inclined ditties, the results will delight those who know their Piblokto from their Blossom Toes. Overthrow is a jittery blast of freakbeat, while Westward Ho? and the brilliantly titled Pitta Bread Man exude a peculiarly English midlife ennui. It's Marco Rossi's lyrics which save them from the realms of pastiche, however, his Neil Hannon-esque wordplay summed up by Priest Hole's priceless couplet: "I couldn't care less about your sleazy past/I'm a very understanding ecclesiast." ★★★★
PAUL MOODY

Download: Priest Hole | Overthrow | Westward Ho?

JUNIOR BOYS
BIG BLACK COAT
CITY SLANG, OUT 5 FEBRUARY

Fifth edition of sophisticated Canadian dance moves.

Graduates of the same post-millennial Ontario scene as Caribou's Dan Snaith, over the past decade Jeremy Greenspan and Matt Didemus have developed an equally idiosyncratic take on 21st-century dance music, lacing classic US grooves with elements drawn from '80s pop, UK garage and late-night R&B. Reunited after a five-year hiatus, their follow-up to 2011's It's All True again showcases their alchemical ability to leaven tough dance beats with emotive harmonies, Greenspan's falsetto working its languorous magic over You Say That's flickering hi-hats, Over It's tensile Chicago house and the title track's acidic disco. At once elegant and enigmatic, only the wilfully prosaic title strikes a jarring note. ★★★★
RUPERT HOWE

Download: You Say That | Over It | Big Black Coat

KULA SHAKER
K 2.0
STRANGEFOLK, OUT 19 FEBRUARY

Britpop survivors rediscover their mojo.

If Kula Shaker emerged in celebrity-crazed 2016 you'd imagine that Crispian Mills's thespian blue-blood – he's the son of Hayley, and the grandson of Sir John – would be seen as more help than hindrance. As it is, a backlash in the wake of million-selling 1996 debut K derailed their career, and their most recent re-formation for 2010's introspective Pilgrims Progress had a world-weary air. Mercifully, a five-year sabbatical finds them both refreshed and free of rancour, Mills tackling pet themes of mantra-induced positivity (Infinite Sun), eco-awareness (Get Right Get Ready) and global armageddon (Death Of Democracy) with typical good humour. Those who baulk at the schlocky, cinematic nature of the Kulas, summed up by preposterous raga-rock closer Mountain Lifter, really are missing all the fun. ★★★
PAUL MOODY

Download: Infinite Sun | Death Of Democracy | Mountain Lifter

K-X-P
III PART II
OM/SVART, OUT NOW

Less is more, as Finnish space rockers complete their third album.

Seven songs, seven riffs, probably even less by way of tunes, hooks or changes of pace. Yep, the second part of K-X-P's third album fills its 40 minutes in much the same way as last March's III Part I – which is to say, very nicely. Recorded in the same sessions as its other half, Part II sees the Finnish quartet largely paring back the disco influences of their previous album (2013's II) leaving a space-rock beast garnished with occasional electronics rather than full-on techno-rock. Air Burial provides a rare detour of sorts, lead singer Timo Kaukolampi's doomy vocals sharing space with some intrusive Goat-like yelps, as does the slow throb of Transuranic Heavy Elements. But this is not a rut they need getting out of – there's might in their minimalism. ★★★★
STEVE YATES

Download: Freeway | To Believe | Siren | Air Burial

Kula Shaker: "refreshed and free of rancour."

LISSIE
MY WILD WEST
COOKING VINYL, OUT 12 FEBRUARY

Breezy Midwestern folk-popper's best effort yet.

Lissie's calling card as an artist has always been the suggestion of some great well of strength. It's there in the Stevie Nicks hurl to her voice, the forceful swell of her music, the striking boldness of her 2010 debut Catching A Tiger and its 2013 successor Back To Forever. This third studio album continues in that vein, charting her relocation from California to a farm in the rural Midwest – though anyone expecting a down-home country feel to the attendant songs might be disappointed; these are steely, defiant pop songs, perfect for radio airplay, roadtrips, dancefloors or just whooping it up at the rodeo. There's a real cleverness at work here, the slow melancholy of departure she nails on Sun Keeps Risin', for instance, set next to the pure pop of Don't You Give Up On Me, plus plenty of space carved out for sonic experimentation and instrumental twitches. It's undoubtedly her strongest album yet. ★★★★
LAURA BARTON

Download: Wild West | Hero | Daughters

ROSIE LOWE
CONTROL
WOLF TONE/POLYDOR, OUT 19 FEBRUARY

Devonian model's long dark night of the R&B-soul.

The face of Karen Millen's autumn/winter 2015 collection, 25-year-old Rosie Lowe's first full-length album has been a labour of love. It arrives more than two years since 2013's promising Right Thing EP and it feels like a summary of her lifetime's wisdom. To judge from its sparse but deceptively lavish vocal layering alone – there's no less than 100 voice tracks on Who's That Girl alone, apparently – its assembly alongside The Invisible's Dave Okumu (Jessie Ware, Paloma Faith, Kwabs) has been painstaking. The jazz-weaned singer plies a refreshingly British take on sista-soul, over ultra-slo-mo R&B beats that make The Weeknd and The xx look too hasty and elaborate by half. Control is ambitious, nocturnal, but ultimately too frosty to fall in love with over time – cold comfort, if you're suffering issues of relationship commitment (Run Run Run) and self-governance (the title track). With stand-out anthem Woman, however, Lowe hits unforeseen heights of melodic warmth – a signpost for a Top 5 future. ★★★
ANDREW PERRY

Download: Worry Bout Us | Woman | I'll Be Gone

THE ARGUMENTALIST

MENTOR HEALTH ISSUES

Jay Z has offered to help Harry Styles go solo. He should be wary, megastars aren't always the best advisers, says DAVID QUANTICK.

Jonathan Wilkes (left) and pal Robbie Williams: a match not quite made in pop heaven.

Mentors are all the rage nowadays, aren't they? Established acts using their experience and fame to guide the careers of fledgling wannabe pop stars. What new artist on The X Factor hasn't benefited from the sudden arrival of Sinitta at "boot camp" to offer tips on surviving in the carnivorous world of celebrity? How many young people now firmly glued into the pantheon of stardom have Will.I.Am to thank for their solid-gold flying dirigible homes and their robot butlers? And where would Adele be without, I don't know, the wise old heads of The Reynolds Girls or someone like that to tell her what to do with her talent?

Mentoring is a meaningless trope, really. There are no real mentors in pop, just managers, hangers-on, stage-struck parents and, most influential of all, drug dealers. But modern entertainment loves the notion of mentoring – the idea that some major pop figure, until now driven by ambition, greed and an all-consuming belief in their own importance, might suddenly stop their own career dead in its tracks and spend time nurturing a future rival. (I imagine Madonna sitting down with her songwriters and saying, "Find out who the new Madonna is and make her record an awful duet with me. That'll finish her career before it starts.")

MODERN ENTERTAINMENT LOVES THE NOTION OF MENTORING.

But we like the idea. And so, admittedly, do famous people sometimes. Remember Mr Hudson? Mentored by Kanye West, Mr Hudson was last seen producing Duran Duran, which is surely not the dream Kanye had in mind for his protégé (unless he secretly really hated him). Noel Gallagher was the mastermind behind the career of Proud Mary, who did not so much fail to set the charts alight as actually fireproof the charts and surround them with fully-equipped state-of-the-art fire-fighting equipment. And surely we can never forget Robbie Williams's protégé, Jonathan Wilkes, if only because you have to have heard of something before you can forget it.

If you are a young, up-and-coming act, and a grizzle-faced pop star offers to help your career, just remember this: it's young people who help old people to cross the road, and not vice versa.

MIRRORPIX

MASS GOTHIC

MASS GOTHIC

SUB POP, OUT 5 FEBRUARY

Impressively gritty reinvention from hitherto obscure New York musician.

Mass Gothic are the new vehicle for ex-Hooray For Earth frontman Noel Heroux. For those not up to speed, HFE were a poppier, less cool version of Yeasayer or first album-era MGMT. All of which makes his new venture even more striking. Taped to four-track over the winter of 2014/15, it takes the melodic precision Heroux's always possessed and adds a depth that's been absent until now. Tracks such as the exhilarating Nice Night – layered in stinging distortion – offer a cathartic energy that it's hard not to be pulled in by. Other highlights include the crisp modern doo-wop of Every Night You've Got To Save Me and the pulsating digital clatter of Want To, Bad. The sound of a man finding freedom, it's an impressive reincarnation. ★★★

JAMES OLDHAM

Download: Want To, Bad | Nice Night | Own The Road

JEB LOY NICHOLS

LONG TIME TRAVELLER

ON U-SOUND, OUT 5 FEBRUARY

Wyoming-born, Wales-dwelling Americana man's experiments in dub.

Jeb Loy Nichols is an artist who has spent a lengthy career merging the music we might loosely term Americana with an array of other genres – soul, dub and blues among them. This LP falls very much into the dub camp – produced by Adrian Sherwood and backed by Dub Syndicate/Roots Radics. Over 10 tracks (plus 11 extra versions), it's a little on the weighty side and a tad monotone – but at its best it proves enlightening. Its sad songs are its finest, as if country and reggae might be united by their sense of loss, the dub backing bringing out new angles in Nichols's Townes Van Zandt tones. ★★★

LAURA BARTON

Download: Salt Of A Fallen Tear | Mother Your Son | Lonely King Of The Country

YOKO ONO

YES, I'M A WITCH TOO

MANIMAL, OUT 19 FEBRUARY

Multi-flavoured follow-up to 2007 remix album Yes, I'm A Witch.

The thematic predecessor to this LP underlined Yoko Ono's re-evaluation as a musical envelope-pusher by a new generation of artists including Cat Power, Spiritualized and The Flaming Lips, who all reworked moments from her back catalogue. This sequel successfully repeats the trick. Anyone who still views Ono as a teeth-grinding screecher should be pointed to her tender vocals on Peter, Bjorn And John's pyrotechnic '60s treatment of Mrs Lennon (from 1971's Fly) and amid John Palumbo's pulsing electronics in I Have A Woman Inside My Soul (1973's Approximately Infinite Universe). Elsewhere, the fact that Ono becomes the third member of Sparks in Give Me Something and that Moby and Miike Snow manage to drag this octogenarian onto the dancefloor is cause for celebration. ★★★★

TOM DOYLE

Download: Give Me Something | Mrs Lennon | I Have A Woman Inside My Soul

ROO PANES

PAPERWEIGHTS

CRC, OUT 12 FEBRUARY

Brit-folk pin-up is much more than a pretty face.

Anyone baffled by Mumford & Sons' new direction should look Roo Panes's way. Add a kick drum and four-part harmonies to the likes of the title track and you could have something straight off Sigh No More. But that's not to tar Panes with someone else's brush: the Dorset-born ex-model is notable for his very rejection of such bombast. Panes identifies far more with Nick Drake, emotions swelling and dipping on arrangements that accompany his pastoral imagery and light guitar, his voice rising from the depths to eye-watering falsetto in a blink. Mostly, however, Panes allows songs such as Summer Thunder freedom to soar, rather than bending them into uncomfortable shapes, a knack few of his peers possess. ★★★★

ANDY FYFE

Download: Stay With Me | The Original | Summer Thunder | Where I Want To Go

POLIÇA

UNITED CRUSHERS

Third outing from electro-pop pair.

Over two albums, the Minneapolis duo Poliça have a well-won reputation for making widely acclaimed records that no one can quite remember. Their brand of electronic pop rests heavily on the choral voice of Channy Leaneagh and the gloomy soundscapes of producer Ryan Olson. Between them they concoct a distinctiveness that is both strength and weakness, being unlike anyone else, yet so much like themselves it becomes difficult to get inside the individual songs. There is stuff to admire: Summer Please has the ghostliness of The Knife hoiked to a perkier beat, while Wedding throbs at pace, Leaneagh lowering her tone and upping the passion. But those moments don't add up to something momentous. Poliça have made another good record, but

MIRRORPIX

POWERED UP

The New Power Generation help the prolific Purple One get back on track.

PRINCE

HITnRUN PHASE TWO

NPG, OUT NOW

Anyone hoping that Prince's classic-tunes-stuffed Hit And Run tour of 2014 might remind him of the days when he exercised quality control and didn't just splurge out iffy album after iffy album were likely to have been massively deflated by what came next – more iffy albums.

But for the over-saturated and aching mind of anyone still keeping up with Prince's output, the arrival of HITnRUN Phase Two is something of a reward. It may be his fourth record in 15 months, and some of its tracks may have already been available as singles or promos since 2012, but it's easily the best addition to his patchy latter-day catalogue. After the ropey house and crunk dabblings of Phase One, it reunites him with The New Power Generation and a band sound that consciously recalls the highs of his heyday. RocknRoll Love Affair references the synth hook of 1999 and strummy police brutality protest/call-for-peace opener Baltimore bears an echo of Take Me With U. Sometimes Prince makes the look over his shoulder even more direct, as when in Stare he playfully harks back to his bikini brief-wearing days with the line, "We used to go onstage in our underwear" and drops into the wristy guitar riff of Kiss.

But it's perhaps no surprise when the quality dips. Xtraloveable is a reworking of a song written for his all-girl protégé trio Vanity 6, scrapped in 1982, which remains a pedestrian perv-funker. Single-entendre rocker Screwdriver is just rotten, but followed two tracks later by the gorgeously wistful ballad Revelation. And so, yet again, Prince remains an artist in sore need of an outside editor. Still, if your attention span as a Prince fan has been sorely tested, HITnRUN Phase Two is a good point to reconnect with him. ★★★

TOM DOYLE

Download: Baltimore | RocknRoll Love Affair | Stare | Revelation

Prince: "recalling the highs of his heyday."

there may never be a Poliça album as good as the one inside your head. ★★★

STEVE YATES

Download: Summer Please | Wedding | Baby Sucks

CHARLIE PUTH

NINE TRACK MIND

ATLANTIC, OUT 29 JANUARY

Clean-cut crooner who makes Sam Smith sound like Otis Redding.

Charlie Puth is America's newest wholesome, winsome pin-up. "It's Kama Sutra showtime", he promises to Meghan Trainor on recent chart-topper Marvin Gaye, but it's as convincing as his claims that he "could climb Kilimanjaro a thousand times" and "Superman got nothing on me". Because Puth is as sexless as he is limp, and having a song called We Don't Talk Anymore is far from the only Cliff Richard comparison. Each song aspires to Sam Cooke-style simplicity, but any charm is defeated by the Auto-Tuned artificiality. And if you think you've heard his songs before, you probably have (try singing Atomic Kitten's Whole Again over Marvin Gaye, for example). Great pop should roar like a lion. Nine Track Mind whimpers like a sick kitten. Puth-etic. ★

SIMON PRICE

Download: My Gospel

DAN SARTAIN

CENTURY PLAZA

ONE LITTLE INDIAN, OUT 19 FEBRUARY

Greaseback rock'n'roller goes coldwave.

On the cover of his fifth album, Alabama's Dan Sartain cocks a bloodshot eye in light cast through a slatted blind. It's an uncharacteristically '80s synth-pop look for Sartain but then "outside-the-box" has lately been his motto (witness his 2014 marimba-tickling stab at The Knife's Pass This On). Here, guitars are mostly banished in favour of keyboards and drum machines – career suicide, if the garage-rock maverick actually had any career to lose. After that surprise to his small core of diehard fans, Century Plaza morphs from folly to sneakingly inspired makeover, as Sartain's paranoid songcraft prospers amid a spacious and varied electro-soundworld: while oldie Walk Among The Cobras nods obviously towards Suicide (the band!), Sinking In The Shallow End has genuine, early-Depeche Mode pop appeal. First Bloods' blast of riffs suggests the guitars may soon return, but these unforeseen electro-moves should rightly bag fresh converts. ★★★

ANDREW PERRY

Download: Walk Among The Cobras | Black Party | Sinking In The Shallow End

Sia: "maybe next time she should think more like a pop star."

HIT & MISS

Australian songwriter-turned-star runs out of her trademark pop hooks.

SIA

THIS IS ACTING

RCA, OUT NOW

The critique of "manufactured" pop music may be almost as old as pop itself, but the arguments recently gained new momentum thanks to John Seabrook's exposé of the modern hit-making production line, The Song Machine: Inside The Hit Factory, in which unknown songwriters and producers are shown to power the careers of megastars such as Rihanna. Exceptions to Seabrook's strict division of labour are rare, though Adelaide-born singer and songwriter Sia Furler is one of them, having co-written songs for Christina Aguilera, Beyoncé and Rihanna before experiencing her own global breakthrough with 2014's 1000 Forms Of Fear.

Unlike her celebrity clients, however, Sia has tried to keep out of the limelight. For one thing, the 40-year-old has seen it all before, having started her career back in mid-'90s London where she sang backing vocals for Jamiroquai before joining trip-hop duo Zero 7 as singer. Fame, she decided then, didn't suit her – especially following later episodes of drug addiction and near-suicidal breakdown. The result was that when 1000 Forms Of Fear did finally make her a star, she rejected the attention, obscuring her face (if not her trademark blonde bob) on the album's cover, using child dancer Maddie Ziegler as a stand-in for video promos and being photographed for Billboard magazine with a paper bag over her head.

From its title, her seventh studio album could be read as a further acknowledgement that celebrity is all about performance. Yet the acting in question actually relates to her role as a backroom lyricist and songwriter. Unlike 1000 Forms Of Fear, which featured songs she had put aside for herself, everything here, with the exception of the distinctly Rihanna-like One Million Bullets, was originally written with other artists in mind. In fact, the two singles released last autumn, Bird Set Free and Alive, were first intended for Adele. Both sound like it, too, especially Bird Set Free, with its rippling piano intro, sweeping strings and message of emotional emancipation ("I have a voice... hear me roar tonight!"). As for Alive, the way Sia's voice cracks on the high notes suggest it's one she might have passed on, too.

Two songs on, it also raises the question which shadows the whole album: if Adele didn't think the song was up to scratch, why should Sia think it worth another go? Yet having got the Adele "rejects" out of the way, she slowly begins to find hooks and arrangements she's better equipped to handle. Cheap Thrills's sassy electro twerk steals a move on Charli XCX and House On Fire shows that whatever Robyn can do, Sia's her equal. The roiling Kanye West collaboration Reaper, originally meant for Rihanna, swaggers with rhythm and soul. Space Between, meanwhile, is a Hollywood-scale ballad about broken relationships just waiting for a romcom to soundtrack.

Such moments at least prove Sia was right in thinking not all her cast-offs were ready for the scrapheap. But one can't shake the feeling that This Is Acting was compromised from the start. Maybe next time Sia herself should think more like a pop star – and call in some help of her own. ★★★

RUPERT HOWE

Download: Bird Set Free | Reaper | House On Fire

BENJAMIN SCHOOS

NIGHT MUSIC, LOVE SONGS

FREAKSVILLE, OUT 29 JANUARY

Writer of 2009 Belgian Eurovision contender finds hidden depths.

More than a decade recording as Miam Monster Miam failed to get Benjamin Schoos recognised beyond his native Belgium. A change of fortunes came when he reverted to his real name for 2012's China Man vs Chinagirl, an idiosyncratic Francophone concept album about a wrestler. It owed much to Serge Gainsbourg and was an international success. His third album marks another departure, being a set of sumptuous chansons that strip away much of the polarising quirkiness of his earlier work. Opener I Love You sets the tone, Schoos's half-spoken, half-sung vocals (in French again, despite the title) undercut by a sparse piano motif and melancholic saxophone. Nothing else is quite as mesmerising, but it all makes for absorbing late-night listening, and another successful change of direction. ★★★

PHIL MONGREDIEN

Download: I Love You | Une Fille En Or | Conducteur Fantôme

MAVIS STAPLES

LIVIN' ON A HIGH NOTE

ANTI-, OUT 12 FEBRUARY

A gospel-soul legend rocks – righteously.

Where gospel meets grit, Mavis Staples is not just a great singer but a cultural monument and moral matriarch who adds stature by association to icons such as Bob Dylan and Prince, and to rootsy alt-rockers Wilco's Jeff Tweedy, who produced her previous two albums, and M Ward, who does the honours here. Like Tweedy, Ward frames that rough-hewn 76-year-old voice of hard-knock experience yet warm idealism in uncluttered space. With 2013's One True Vine a brilliantly hard album to follow, Ward gets tough, with raunchy R&B guitar riffs rooting songs in the hips but gazing to heaven. The Staples message? Live right on earth and we'll make that higher ground. Including songs by Neko Case and Nick Cave, this fine album reaches way beyond the church. ★★★★

MAT SNOW

Download: History, Now | Take Us Back | Love And Trust

DAN STUART WITH TWIN TONES

MARLOWE'S REVENGE

CADIZ, OUT 5 FEBRUARY

Green On Red man was unwell. He's better now.

Meilyr Jones
2013

MOSHI MOSHI, 2016

"Meilyr Jones has been on tour with us. Fucking hell, he intrigues me. He's an intriguing guy. I don't want to curse him but I predict really big things for him, check it out." *[2013 is released at the end of Feb]*

Anyone concerned for Stuart's well-being following his drugs'n'all "false" memoir The Deliverance Of Marlowe Billings and its eponymous breakdown album will be relieved by Marlowe's Revenge. It finds him in comparatively rude health and shunning the more obvious Americana route to instead record with Mexico City hombres Twin Tones, whose scuzzy Latino country dovetails with his rekindled love of garage rock. Stuart (or "Marlowe", if you must) isn't entirely rehabilitated, however, and dark underbellies are exposed and scratched on slice-of-street-life novellas such as Zipolite and The Whores Above, while Name Hog's bitter attack on some nameless colleague's lack of anything artistic to say is rather rich considering how many songs here rip off Lou Reed's Sweet Jane. Nevertheless, this wonderfully sleazy chunk of dirty, dangerous rock'n'roll gets Stuart firmly back in the game. ★★★

ANDY FYFE

Download: Hola Guapa | The Whores Above | Soy Un Hombre

SUNFLOWER BEAN

HUMAN CEREMONY

FAT POSSUM, OUT 5 FEBRUARY

Superior indie-psych dream-pop.

Operating in a hazily intoxicating middle ground somewhere between Wolf Alice and Temples, this New York trio tried to capture the excitement around their early shows by recording this debut in just seven days. It's an album steeped in that kind of youthful exuberance. The title track introduces the record as a psychedelic hideaway from our nasty, high-speed post-millennial world – "you can take the elixir now," invites guitarist Nick Kivlen, while bassist Julia Cumming coos wispily about wanting you to stay. Sunflower Bean duly dispense top-quality indie-pop, rich in early-'80s guitar textures (The Smiths, Love-era Cult) and sublime, unusual songs. At their beefiest, Wall Watcher and 2013 pack a hurtling post-punk buzz, while Easier Said, thanks to Cumming's Fairport Convention-style keening, is the coolest folk-rock number in years. By turns thrilling and blissful, these Sunflowers'll bloom mighty quick. ★★★★

ANDREW PERRY

Download: 2013 | Easier Said | Wall Watcher

Sunflower Bean: "hazily intoxicating."

TEEN

LOVE YES

CARPARK, OUT 19 FEBRUARY

Band of sisters hit a positive note with third album.

While Teen – Lieberson sisters Teeny, Lizzie and Katherine, plus bassist Boshra Al-Saadi – might have taken off to the countryside to create their third album, Love Yes still buzzes and thrums with all the artificial energy of a night in the city. There's the electroclash Shangri-Las of Tokyo, the Haim-an League of All About Us: these songs are shiny, crisp, urban, slicked with an irresistible futuristic gloss. Ever since they released their Sonic Boom-produced debut In Limbo in 2012, the band have been turning up the colour contrast on their neon-bright pop experiments, and here the flashes and bleeps of Animal or Example generate a dazzling super-saturation. There is depth beneath these surfaces, though, and if Love Yes can lack variety after a while, it never once falls short of energy. ★★★

VICTORIA SEGAL

Download: Tokyo | Animal | Example

TELEGRAM

OPERATOR

GRAM GRAM, OUT 5 FEBRUARY

Eno-loving Anglo-Welsh psych-rock quartet finally release their debut.

Telegram emerged a few years ago, only to be halted by austerity cutbacks when their label dropped them. Self-releasing in early 2016, the passing of time has only rendered them a more solitary presence – a dynamic, characterful Brit-rock band, with a Swansea accent (courtesy of heart-throb Matt Saunders) and a love for Brian Eno's mid-'70s glam-pop material. This belated debut presents them in their muscularly off-centre glory, kick-starting with Rule Number One's Sex Pistols-style riffs, and powering on with max-melodic Follow and Aeons hurtling at the dawn like a herd of wonkily amped-up Lemmys. They left-turn on the mellower, near-eponymous Telegramme, but overall Operator is headlong, upbeat and punchy. ★★★★

ANDREW PERRY

Download: Follow | Aeons | Taffy Come Home

Jack Garratt: "a little bloodless."

SMOOTH MOVER

Bedroom R&B-pop artist could do with a rougher edge.

JACK GARRATT

PHASE

ISLAND, OUT 19 FEBRUARY

The rapid success of Jack Garratt – from BBC Introducing try-out to being voted the Brit Awards Critics' Choice, covered by Ellie Goulding and touring with Mumford & Sons – has a kind of precise logic. There is something about his sound that feels weighted and measured for these times: a falsetto'ed bedroom R&B hybrid that carries a flavour of Sam Smith and Ed Sheeran, wisps of James Blake and Marcus Mumford. So while there's enough sub-bass and digital twonkery to sound edgy, at heart he is a ferociously commercial prospect, with the sort of catch-all pop songs that could have been set down in any number of styles – from power ballad to fey folk – to fit the mood of the day. This is quite a gift of course, but it also feels a little bloodless, and it is a similar want of a pulse that marks his debut album.

Written, recorded and predominantly produced by Garratt himself, Phase is undoubtedly an impressive achievement, a perfectly calibrated collection of songs, largely ballads, about sleepless nights, empty beds and wanting an indecisive lover to stay. Yet there's something a little slippery about it too: the lyrics slide by, the vocals, while obviously heartfelt, often sound strangely unaffecting, and for all the musical twinkling and experimental beats the choruses can feel peculiarly predictable. The result is that a few songs in you find yourself rather craving a bit of imperfection, something scruffy and incorrigible to disrupt all this generic rhythm and gusto. ★★★

LAURA BARTON

Download: Worry | Chemical | My House Is Your Home

THE TEMPERANCE MOVEMENT

WHITE BEAR

EARACHE, OUT NOW

More of the same on second album from rifftastic blues rockers.

The departure of guitarist and founder member Luke Potashnick – who apparently fled for a studio-based career – has placed The Temperance Movement in a tricky position at the very moment they try to build on their patchy self-titled debut of 2013 and last year's stadium support slots with The Rolling Stones. Caught in the headlights, they've stood still and delivered more of the same rough-hewn bluesy rock topped by Phil Campbell's appealing growl. This means moments of inspiration such as the cascading choruses of the opening Three Bulleits (titled, not entirely unpredictably, in honour of Bulleit bourbon), the shimmering and complex I Hope I'm Not Losing My Mind and the outstanding Battle Lines. Elsewhere though their Reef-ian riffs have a second-hand whiff and they're derailed by a dearth of new ideas. ★★

JOHN AIZLEWOOD

Download: Battle Lines | Three Bulleits | I Hope I'm Not Losing My Mind

TREETOP FLYERS

PALOMINO

LOOSE, OUT 26 FEBRUARY

Second album from North Londoners who sound like Southern Californians.

Back in 2014, the future seemed so simple for Treetop Flyers: make a fine debut album, The Mountain Moves; bask in the comparisons to Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young and Fleet Foxes; make second, superior album; clean up. Instead, the band who were bearded before the hipster revolution and named after a Stephen Stills tune were waylaid by misfortune including divorce, the death of singer Reid Morrison's father (as detailed on the fragile, harmony-laden St Andrew's Cross) and the departure of bassist Matthew Starritt. For all that they remain in thrall to their American heroes and for all that Morrison still sounds like Cinnamon Girl-era Neil Young, they've made huge leaps. When Sleepless Nights starts to resemble the euphoric rush of Earth, Wind & Fire's Fantasy and the epic Never Been As Hard rumbles through six minutes of menace and twangsome melancholy, it's as if their travails have fuelled rather than fractured their creativity. ★★★★

JOHN AIZLEWOOD

Download: Sleepless Nights | Never Been As Hard | It's A Shame | Wild Winds

TRICKY PRESENTS SKILLED MECHANICS

SKILLED MECHANICS

FALSE IDOLS/!K7, OUT NOW

Trip-hop pioneer returns with new collective vision.

Taking their name from an ex-CIA operative's term for political assassins, Skilled Mechanics are the latest musical project from the ever-mercurial Tricky, a loose grouping that includes his old Wild Bunch compadre DJ Milo and his regular drummer Luke Harris. Their music isn't always as precisely targeted as the title suggests, but Tricky remains master of the deftly disorientating mind-state, wobbling somewhere between the intensely personal, the woozily sensual and the disturbingly abstract. Despite its collaborative approach – Harris sings a cover of nu-metallers Stone Sour's Bother, Danish singer Oh Land simmers on I'm Not Going – the most successful tracks are those where Tricky is front and centre, as on the stifling, sickly autobiography of Boy, or the sibilant rustling of Don't Go. Still singular, no matter what company he keeps. ★★★

VICTORIA SEGAL

Download: Don't Go | Boy | Necessary

THE WAVE PICTURES

A SEASON IN HULL

WYMESWOLD, OUT 12 FEBRUARY

Quirky indie-pop trio make an album at a birthday party.

Last January, on singer Dave Tattersall's birthday, he and the rest of The Wave Pictures congregated in a room with a bunch of friends, acoustic guitars and one microphone to record an album. The idea was inspired by the way American bluegrass pioneer Bill Monroe used to record, with simplicity, spontaneity and a sense of community. The result is a wonderfully warm record, available on vinyl only, that showcases what a special band The Wave Pictures have become over the course of almost 20 years together. From the sultry Slick Black River From The Rain to the tenderness of Thin Lizzy Live And Dangerous, the laid-back setting allows for Tattersall's lyrics to shine out like the most sublime late-night repartee. ★★★★

Download: Slick Black River From The Rain | David In A Field Of Pumpkins | Thin Lizzy Live And Dangerous

Lucinda Williams: "a sense of impending finality."

LUCINDA WILLIAMS

THE GHOSTS OF HIGHWAY 20

HIGHWAY 20, OUT NOW

Country poet ponders death and what comes after.

Since blowing the doors off alt-country with 1998's Car Wheels On A Gravel Road, Lucinda Williams has spent much time since exploring her Southern roots with albums that offer subtler pleasures. The Ghosts Of Highway 20 finds her further down that road, exploring the languid mysteries of North America's Southeast – the titular route runs from South Carolina to Texas, through Williams's native Louisiana. In its elegiac tone, its gauzy production and its sense of impending finality, The Ghosts... is Williams's Time Out Of Mind, the album on which Bob Dylan pondered his own mortality. Songs such as Death Came hang heavy with loss – Williams's father, the poet Miller Williams, died in 2015, and Dust uses one of his poems. Williams sings about getting to a better place on the bluesy Doors Of Heaven. She knows that nothing lasts forever, but also that everything lingers on. ★★★★

ROBERT LEVINE

Download: Dust | Doors Of Heaven | Factory | Faith & Grace

MARLON WILLIAMS

MARLON WILLIAMS

DEAD OCEANS, OUT 19 FEBRUARY

Debut from hard-to-pin-down Kiwi.

Former choirboy Marlon Williams has been showered with awards and praise in his New Zealand homeland, his name alone seeming to predetermine a musical future. Even so, the gusto he attacks his debut album with is staggering, belting through any number of stylistic avenues. There's the helter-skelter train track beat of opener Hello Miss Lonesome, Gene Clark-meets-The Beatles on After All, the Walker Brothers-style baroque-pop of I'm Lost Without You, Dark Child's downbeat country balladry, even a torch-heavy cover of Nina Simone's When I Was A Young Girl... the problem is that it's all so breathless he's shoehorned an entire career onto one disc. If Williams would only take the time to explore just a few of the ideas he's presented here, his album would be far deeper than it is broad. ★★★

ANDY FYFE

Download: After All | Dark Child | Strange Things

ON THE BRAIN

GO SLOWLY

Ten years after indie blew up big, bands have learned that a steady pace wins the race, says NIALL DOHERTY.

Life in the fast lane: Kaiser Chiefs quickly tasted major success.

The mid-noughties didn't set a great precedent for British guitar-rock. It's not that the music wasn't any good, but more how the bum-rush nature of the era has taken nearly a decade to shake off. It felt exciting at the time, as bands such as Franz Ferdinand, Razorlight, Bloc Party and Kaiser Chiefs were all fast-tracked to headlining massive venues within one year of releasing their debuts and topping festival bills within two. Indie bands and their hair-straightened frontmen had taken over.

It was all so easy to get carried away and overlook what was actually happening, which was creating unrealistic expectations for the next decade of bands to live up to. All of a sudden playing a venue such as the 2000-capacity Astoria in London (RIP), as Radiohead had done between Pablo Honey and The Bends, and Blur had done to support their second album Modern Life Is Rubbish, was not good enough. If bands weren't headlining Alexandra Palace by the time they'd finished touring their first album, they were commercially second-rate. Which is ridiculous.

BRING ME THE HORIZON AND FOALS SPENT YEARS TOURING AND HONING THEIR SOUND.

I was thinking about this for two reasons recently. The first was watching the annual new band jamboree at the end of last year and the start of this one. Frontloading expectations on artists who haven't started working on their debut albums yet seems like a one-way ticket to disappointment.

Secondly, two of the bands who excited me most in 2015 were those who'd taken the long way round. Both Bring Me The Horizon and Foals spent years touring and honing their sound, starting off in venues with sticky floors and stickier toilets and gradually playing bigger places as they went. Foals will embark on their maiden arena tour next month, and Bring Me The Horizon later this year. Flash-in-the-pans will always be a part of music, but often the longest careers in rock'n'roll are those who have served an old-school apprenticeship. It's a good lesson to remember the tribulations faced by those groups who blew up big and quick in the mid-noughties. In a distracted, now-now-now world, there still isn't a shortcut for some things.

Steve Mason: "the music here is frequently radiant."

BETA MAX

Brit shape-shifter hits his solo creative peak.

STEVE MASON
MEET THE HUMANS

DOMINO, OUT 26 FEBRUARY

Steve Mason might have been making idiosyncratic, often brilliant, solo records under various guises for over a decade and a half now – he released the first King Biscuit Time EP back in late '98 – but the benchmark against which everything he does is judged remains the first three explosively innovative EPs he made with The Beta Band in 1997/98.

That's understandable on one level, as so inventive and fully-formed was that music when it first appeared. It's also unfair, as there's now an increasingly strong argument that his subsequent solo career has matched, and perhaps even surpassed, his early achievements. Certainly his last record, 2013's quasi protest record Monkey Minds In The Devil's Time, was a landmark release, a thrillingly sprawling, genre-defying epic.

Meet The Humans is, inevitably, something of a left turn. Conceived in a more collaborative fashion with members of his live band, conceptually it's a determinedly more optimistic affair. Produced by Elbow's Craig Potter, the music here is frequently radiant, often feeling like it's dappled in sunlight. One of the chief reasons for that is because right from the start much of it is shot through with a consciously Balearic quality. That's never more explicit than in the tempo and keyboard lifts on lead-off single Planet Sizes, which draws heavily from a classic early-house template.

That's not to say, though, that Meet The Humans is more one-dimensional than previous efforts. The album is characteristically eclectic, veering from the Augustus-Pablo-meets-the-Stones groove of Alive to the beatific folk of To A Door and finally the almost cinematic hip-hop of closer Words In My Head. This restless, shape-shifting experimentalism might have been something Mason's been working on now for two decades, but it's rarely sounded better than it does here. ★★★★

JAMES OLDHAM

Download: Planet Sizes | Water Bored | Alive

THE WHITE BUFFALO
LOVE AND THE DEATH OF DAMNATION

EARACHE, OUT 12 FEBURARY

Fifth album from Sons Of Anarchy-featured Jake Smith.

Long of hair and almost as long of beard, Oregon-born, Southern California-raised singer/songwriter Jake Smith has been attempting to escape cult status for more than a decade now. Having placed nine songs on hit biker-gang TV drama Sons Of Anarchy, plus appearances on the Safe Haven and West Of Memphis film soundtracks, his moment may be nigh. His voice is slightly less grizzled and slightly less Ray LaMontagne than it was and so he's plumped this time for an edgy croon, more akin to Pearl Jam's Eddie Vedder. Smith's capacity to tell tales and evoke atmospheres (Chico has a driving, passionate Mariachi undertow) remains undimmed, though. I Got You is an unashamedly affecting duet with Oklahoma City singer/songwriter Audra Mae, Last Call To Heaven's gruffness never masks its pop heart and when Smith rocks out on Dark Days he's a turbo-charged Bruce Springsteen, equal parts brains and brawn. ★★★★

JOHN AIZLEWOOD

Download: Last Call To Heaven | I Got You | Chico | Dark Days

WILD NOTHING
LIFE OF PAUSE

BELLA UNION, OUT 19 FEBRUARY

Luminous third album from fast-evolving alternative talent.

A group in name only, Wild Nothing is essentially a solo project driven by Virginian singer-songwriter-producer Jack Tatum, even if the sound of his third album displays the kind of depth and opulence that requires guest musicians and high-end studios – parts of Life Of Pause were recorded in Sweden at ABBA's old studio with Peter, Bjorn And John's drummer John Eriksson in attendance. Still, Tatum's sonic upgrade pays off handsomely, the fragile dream-pop of his 2010 debut Gemini now transformed into a mesmerising swirl of winsome hooks, subtle electronics and nods to influences old and new: Reichpop's rippling marimbas evoke arch-minimalist Philip Glass, A Woman's Wisdom suggests a languid, chillwave The Cure, while the closing Love Underneath My Thumb even strays towards Kurt Vile's zoned-out psychedelia. ★★★★

RUPERT HOWE

Download: Reichpop | A Woman's Wisdom | TV Queen | To Know You | Love Underneath My Thumb

SAUL WILLIAMS
MARTYR LOSER KING
FADER LABEL, OUT 29 JANUARY

Avant-garde hip-hop poet and activist returns with first album in five years.

The passage of time has only intensified Saul Williams's ire. True to previous form, Martyr Loser King is another gripping dispatch of socially conscious poetry, both rapped and melodised over claustrophobic beats and chameleonic soundscapes. Here, Williams flicks through a Rolodex of issues with an unflinching gaze, tackling everything from prescribed notions of race, sex and gender on Think Like They Book Say to genocide and computer hacking on Burundi, a powerful duet with Warpaint's Emily Kokal. Most impressive, however, is Williams's polemical technique. Rather than preaching on stand-out track The Bear/Coltan As Cotton, he leaves you to do the thinking. By the time Homes/Drones/Poems/Drums closes proceedings by dovetailing the plight of homeless people in Detroit with those in the village of Bil'in on the slopes of the West Bank, Williams has offered much to admire, and even more to contemplate. ★★★★

GEORGE GARNER

Download: The Bear/Coltan As Cotton | Homes/Drones/Poems/Drums

WOLFMOTHER
VICTORIOUS
UNIVERSAL, OUT 19 FEBRUARY

Return to form for Sydney fuzz-rockers.

Wolfmother's self-titled 2005 debut combined stoned-age riffing with the sort of numbskull pop hooks designed to make teenage boys tingle. Ten years, five million album sales and one solo LP later (2013's Keep Moving) Andrew Stockdale has returned to this tried and trusted formula. However, whereas 2014's New Crown smacked of a rushed attempt to recapture former glories, Victorious is as cocksure as its title suggests. City Lights and Best Of A Bad Situation are irresistible drivetime anthems that nod to Rush and the Faces respectively, while Gypsy Caravan has the dumb-but-fun heaviosity of an out-take from 2009's Cosmic Egg. Daft, unquestionably, but Stockdale's vintage metal pastiches succeed through their sheer conviction. ★★★

PAUL MOODY

Download: City Lights | Best Of A Bad Situation | The Love That You Give

WORKING FOR A NUCLEAR FREE CITY
WHAT DO PEOPLE DO ALL DAY?
MELODIC, OUT 29 JANUARY

Eclectic Mancunian art-rockers continue to beguile and bamboozle.

Unsurprisingly for a band who cite both jazz pianist Bill Evans and The Grateful Dead as influences, it's hard to pin down what WFANFC are all about. Perhaps the easiest thing to say is that their music has often resembled a more expansive and lo-fi take on the magpie sensibilities of The Beta Band. Their latest is a typically diverse offering, opening with garbled radio interference before giving way to a mid-period Beck groove (Bottle Rocket) and ending with a sweepingly euphoric instrumental drone (Leaving). In between, their lo-fi folktronica is as beguiling, and as scattershot, as ever. ★★★

JAMES OLDHAM

Download: Bottle Rocket | Good As Gold | Leaving

ADRIAN YOUNGE
SOMETHING ABOUT APRIL II
LINEAR LABS, OUT NOW

Soul revivalist gives it the exotica touch.

When he's not scoring Ghostface Killah albums, Adrian Younge is busy indulging his love of American soul and European soundtracks of the '70s. Something About April was an imaginary story about an affair between a married black man and a younger white woman, and its follow-up continues the theme of forbidden love, with vocal roles for Stereolab's Laetitia Sadler and neo-soulmen Raphael Saadiq and Bilal. The limitations of Younge's working method – playing most of the music himself, often looping the results to create samples – means the baroque sounds you feel sure he's hearing in his head don't always make it to the recording. But the range of his ambition and the nailed-on vocal performances soar beyond. ★★★★

STEVE YATES

Download: Sittin' By The Radio | Psalms

YOUR FRIEND
GUMPTION
DOMINO, OUT 29 JANUARY

Kansas artist demands you lean in for her moody debut.

Immediate gratification isn't really a concept that has much place on Taryn Miller's first LP. Instead, Gumption is slow, resolute, low on dazzling epiphanies but high on atmosphere and texture. Inspired by avant-gardist William Basinski and Broadcast, Miller goes deep into drone-laden territory, preferring subtle distortions to overt attention-grabbing. Who Will I Be In The Morning? suggests Cocteau Twins at 16rpm, while the electro-rumble of Come Back From It sounds like Suicide held underwater until the kicking stops. And though Miller largely sticks to "dour" and "earnest", her commitment to creating her own emotional mood-board gives Gumption a forceful, enveloping presence. ★★★

VICTORIA SEGAL

Download: Heathering | Come Back From It | Who Will I Be In The Morning?

Working For A Nuclear Free City: "as beguiling and scattershot as ever."

MUST BUY
The essential new albums of the last few months

DAVID BOWIE
BLACKSTAR ISO/COLUMBIA

Bowie's coded goodbye found him reconnecting with the masterful art-rock of his Berlin trilogy, enticing the listener to follow him further down a path where sonic surprises lurk around every corner. A musical icon unlike any other.

SAVAGES
ADORE LIFE MATADOR

Jehnny Beth and co continue to explore the existential darkness on this second Savages LP. Mercifully, the London quartet have woven just sufficient light, shade and melody into the mix to make it a compulsive and substantial thrill.

COLDPLAY
A HEAD FULL OF DREAMS PARLOPHONE

With Gwyneth Paltrow, Beyoncé, Noel Gallagher and the US President all chipping in, Coldplay's seventh album is a joyous, infectious return. A giant back-to-life shout after the post-divorce throat-clearing of 2014's Ghost Stories.

SUEDE
NIGHT THOUGHTS SUEDE LTD

Brett Anderson's indie veterans continue their confident comeback, transforming their mid-life anxiety into a thing of beauty on this seventh studio LP. Anderson has rarely sounded more desolate, nor his band more compelling.

DUB AND DUBBER

The first four out-there dub excursions from Adrian Sherwood's On-U Sound conglomerate revisited.

AFRICAN HEAD CHARGE

MY LIFE IN A HOLE IN THE GROUND (1981)
★★★★
ENVIROMENTAL STUDIES (1982)
★★★★
DRASTIC SEASON (1983)
★★★★
OFF THE BEATEN TRACK (1986)
★★★

ON-U SOUND, OUT NOW

Record labels that become their own genre – think 4AD, Warp or early ZTT – are always worth checking out. Founded by High Wycombe-raised dub devotee and producer Adrian Sherwood, On-U Sound pulled off the manoeuvre with style throughout the '80s. A DIY concern that recorded on the cheap for a devoted fanbase, albums by acts including Dub Syndicate, Singers & Players and Creation Rebel provided essential listening for bass-heads, and became a crucial link in the British reggae continuum that includes 2-Tone, trip-hop, junglism and dubstep.

Dating from the early end of the discography, these four albums remain excellent examples of the label's out-there sonic philosophy. Formed by Sherwood with Ghanaian percussionist Bonjo Iyabinghi Noah, African Head Charge featured a shifting amalgamation of players including Roots Radics drummer Style Scott and melodica man Doctor Pablo, but it's Sherwood's mixing desk inspirations that resound most.

He's often referred to the importance of making mistakes, and there seems little over-thinking on first album My Life In A Hole In The Ground, which really was recorded in a subterranean studio. It was, he says, made as a reaction to the claim that Brian Eno and David Byrne's 1981 samplathon My Life In The Bush Of Ghosts was "a vision of a psychedelic Africa". The two albums share a boundary-crossing, non-linear ethno-funk sound, but if Eno and Byrne had art galleries and Perrier water in mind, the tripped-out Afro-dub of MLIAHITG suggests a stinky basement and reams of King Size Rizlas. The Race (Part 1) recalls The Slits and features a boinging jaw harp, Far Away Chant samples reggae voice Prince Far I to almost painful effect while Stone Charge imagines a skeletal junkyard brass duel, played spookily by sax man Deadly Headley. Bizarre yet with its own interior logic, it still sounds utterly modern.

A year later, Environmental Studies presented a more claustrophobic landscape, with the loose cadences of Bonjo's drums adding much to the warp and weft of the reggae rhythms. Sherwood's three-dimensional sound-sculpting is more disorientating in this environment, with muttered voices and beats suddenly foregrounded in tracks that take in North African influences, West African brass and dub dread. Psychedelic is an abused word, but when closers Primitive and Latin Temperament bring their immersive dance music for the brain cells, lift off is complete.

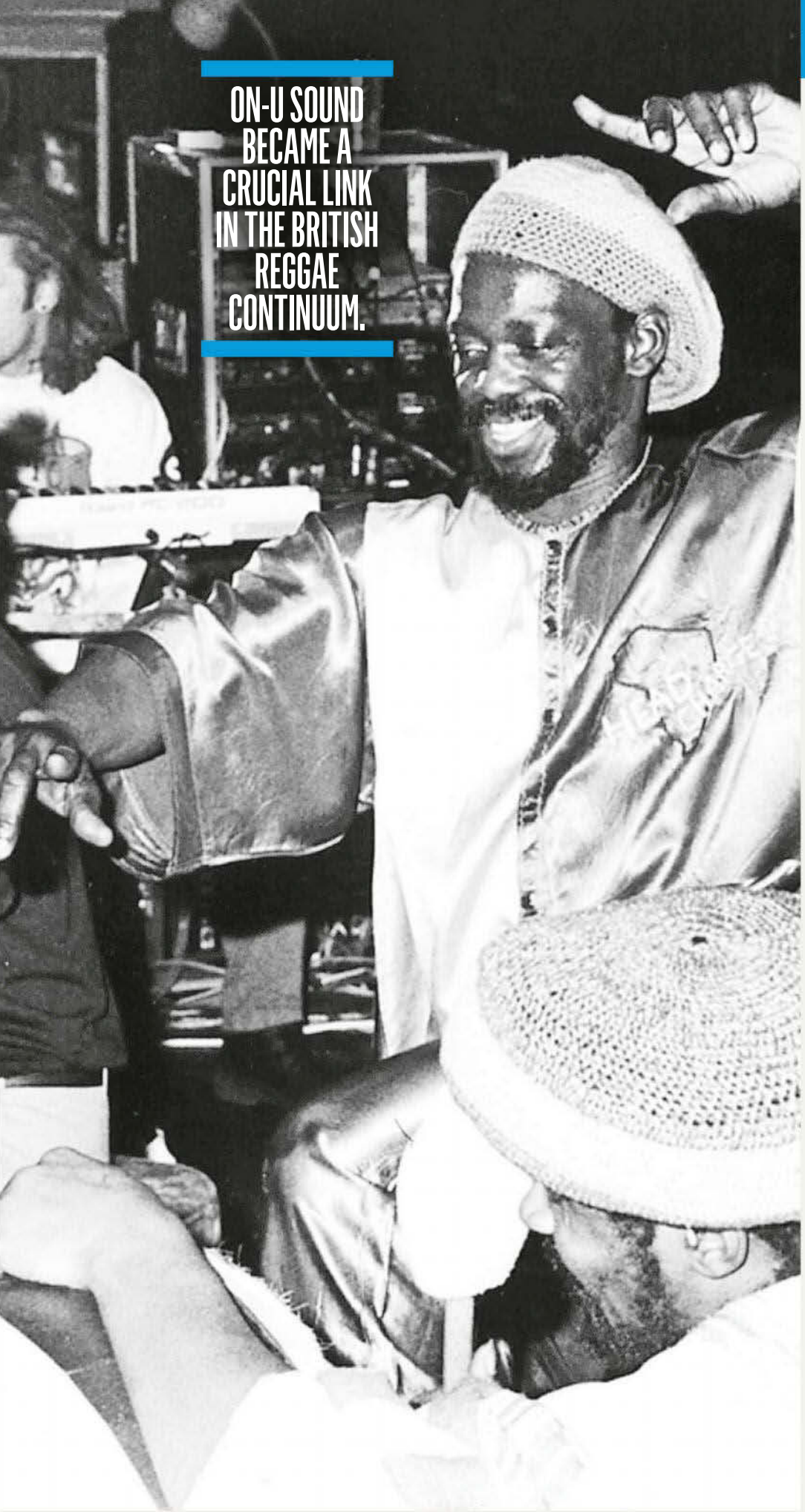
There was to be a further drift to the left with Drastic Season, which, listened to with your ears at the right angle, often sounds like Tago Mago-era Can. Dub effects have been toned down in favour of tape edits, more technology and sudden rhythmic shifts, but the globe-trotting, head-nodding sounds still manage to move in space and even change size, as with Depth Charge's African drumming-meets-'80s arcade game bombing raid. The ghostliness reaches a peak with the lurching and stripped Snake In The Hole, which also appears to include the sounds of warfare.

Compared to its predecessors, the dub-rock world music with samples of 1986's Off The Beaten Track sounds more conventional and somehow cleaner, pointing to 1990's accomplished Songs Of Praise. There's even a didgeridoo on Down Under Again, but the giant devotional dubscapes of closer Over The Sky make it easy to forgive. Consider these records a vast untapped resource: with mistakes like them, who needs things going to plan?

IAN HARRISON

Download: Far Away Chant (My Life In A Hole In The Ground) | Latin Temperament (Environmental Studies) | Depth Charge (Drastic Season) | Over The Sky (Off The Beaten Track)

Hear the drummer get wicked: African Head Charge (Bonjo Iyabinghi Noah, centre) live in 1990: "immersive dance music for the brain cells."



ON-U SOUND BECAME A CRUCIAL LINK IN THE BRITISH REGGAE CONTINUUM.

THE BOLSHOI

5CD BOXSET

ARKIVE, OUT NOW

Post-Batcave shenanigans from darkest Wiltshire.

In their pomp – and "pomp" really was the word – The Bolshoi could've been contenders. Signed to Beggars offshoot Situation Two, home to Bauhaus side-projects and early incarnations of The Cult, the Trowbridge band seemed all set for the goth-rock big time when Happy Boy, a sinisterly spindly tale of parricide, arrived in the summer of 1985. Trevor Tanner's songs scraped away at the surface of suburban normality to uncover the darkness beneath, and he knew how to deliver a bombastic powerchord and reverb-drenched riff. But somehow The Bolshoi never took off. Anti-matrimony anthem A Way was their finest moment, with Books On The Bonfire, a waltz-time warning about incipient philistinism, a distant second, but the imaginatively titled 5CD Boxset, including previously unreleased fourth album Country Life, plus odds-and-ends disc Voyage Of Peculiarities (featuring an improbable live cover of Michael Jackson's Billie Jean with sarkily reworked lyrics), contains more Bolshoi than any sane person could want. ★★★

SIMON PRICE

Download: A Way | Happy Boy | Books On The Bonfire

CREAM

THE SINGLES 1967-1970

UMC, OUT NOW

Eric, Jack and Ginger's original supergroup's 45s, on vinyl.

Cream's über-muso combination of Eric Clapton, Jack Bruce and Ginger Baker continues to scream "albums group", but as their late-'60s moment demanded, they also had to compete in the singles chart. As these 10 45s in new sleeves prove, they managed it with style. Five A-sides are classics of their era that still sound immense – see their rocking mix of blues, jazz and psychedelia on I Feel Free or Sunshine Of Your Love, or how their ultimately fatal tensions manifested on bad-trip song White Room or the agonised Badge. Not all of it's so successful – ever-diplomatic drummer Baker described atypical seaside shuffling debut Wrapping Paper as an "appalling piece of shit", for example – but even with Ginger's Pressed Rat And Warthog and other blues grumble, the product still feels fresh. ★★★

IAN HARRISON

Download: White Room | Sunshine Of Your Love | I Feel Free

The Pop Group: "pulsating with insurgent fury at man's inhumanity to his fellow beings."

DEEP PURPLE

THE VINYL COLLECTION '72-'87

UNIVERSAL MUSIC CATALOGUE, OUT 29 JANUARY

There's more to them than Smoke On The Water.

By 1972, Deep Purple were heavy metal heavyweights. Their mix of Ian Gillan's wind-tunnel vocals, Ritchie Blackmore's extraordinary guitar work and Jon Lord's overwhelming keyboards defined their genre. They still do. That year's swashbuckling Machine Head – their sixth album – remains their most complete work, but they were derailed by global success, global excess and Blackmore's somewhat truculent attitude. The classic line-up collapsed after 1973's patchy Who Do We Think We Are and with priapic unknown David Coverdale on hairy-chested vocals, Burn was sublime, while Stormbringer and 1975's Blackmore-free Come Taste The Band sparkled intermittently. Nine years later, that still squabbling classic line-up reconvened for the accomplished Perfect Strangers and, three years later, the dismal The House Of Blue Light, before further fragmentation beckoned. At their best, though, they were peerless. ★★★

JOHN AIZLEWOOD

Download: Smoke On The Water | Hungry Daze | Highway Star

BERT JANSCH

AVOCET

EARTH, OUT 5 FEBRUARY

Guitarist's 12th album, but the only one about birds.

Farmer, drinker, shopkeeper and Britain's most radical guitarist since Davey Graham, Edinburgh-raised Herbert Jansch was a mainstay of the '60s British folk revival. By 1978, he found himself recording in Denmark alongside violinist Martin Jenkins and bassist Danny Thompson and, having already donated the proceeds of a single to the RSPB, passionately pursuing his ornithological interests. Avocet's six pieces take their titles from birds and they found Jansch gently mischievous, without losing his ever-present sense of quest. The massive, 18-minute title track (loosely based on the traditional The Cuckoo) is an epic of intricacy, but there's a reminder that Jansch could do piano on Lapwing and he almost swings on Bittern. Shortly before he died in 2011 at the age of 67 after battling lung cancer, Jansch anointed Avocet as his favourite of his dozen albums. He had a point. ★★★★

JOHN AIZLEWOOD

Download: Avocet | Lapwing | Kittiwake | Bittern

LOST TREASURE

Felix White, Maccabees

Can
Tago Mago
UNITED ARTISTS, 1971

"After we finished our last album, I decided to go to Australia by myself and watch the cricket. The fans were great and I had an amazing time. When I wasn't at the matches, I just went around listening to Can's Tago Mago. It was my soundtrack to Australia. It was the fucking best!"

THE JAZZ BUTCHER

LAST OF THE GENTLEMAN ADVENTURERS

FIRE, OUT 12 FEBRUARY

Veteran Oxford indie-poppers' 2012 album given another push.

For over three decades, Jazz Butcher leader Pat Fish's black-hearted whimsy has remained determinedly cult. In 2012, they marked their 30th anniversary with a Pledge Music campaign to fund 1000 copies of what remains their most recent album and which now gets a proper release. They're laughably pretentious on Tombé Dans Les Pommes, Fish drones on about Brian Wilson on Shakey and they're as dull as Pulp at their dreariest on Shame About You. But, while Fish's always trenchant observations are stymied by an all-expense-spared production, he's curiously moving on Count Me Out; his Jake Thackray-style drollness is a delight on the title track, while Solar Core suggests he ought to rock out more. ★★

JOHN AIZLEWOOD

Download: Count Me Out | Last Of The Gentleman Adventurers

THE POP GROUP

FOR HOW MUCH LONGER DO WE TOLERATE MASS MURDER?

FREAKS R US, OUT 19 FEBRUARY

Welcome reissue for crazed post-punk agitprop address.

"Violent paranoid music," is how Nick Cave described Bristol's The Pop Group at the time of their second LP in 1980. Violent yes, but vocalist Mark Stewart would probably quote William Burroughs's assertion that, "a paranoid man... knows a little about what's going on." Thirty-six years on, For How Much Longer...'s traumatic punk-funk continues to pulsate with insurgent fury at man's inhumanity to his fellow beings – see Feed The Hungry's condemnation of gangster capitalism and surveillance/mind-control freakouts Justice and There Are No Spectators – and despite references to Henry Kissinger and the Special Patrol Group, it sounds strikingly au

MUST BUY *The essential reissues of the last few months*

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN

THE TIES THAT BIND: THE RIVER COLLECTION COLUMBIA

This boxset, which explores the coming-into-being of The River, is a dizzying experience at times. But it shows The Boss working out where he wants to go, and contains all the excitement that promises within.

LUSH

CHORUS 4AD

It's arguable that the recently re-formed Camden band's mix of dream-pop and indie rock has aged better than many of their shoegazing and Britpop rivals. This fine five-album box is an opportunity for some serious re-evaluation.

FLEETWOOD MAC

TUSK WARNERS

Dubbed "Lindsey's folly" on release in 1979, Tusk is a strange, daring and often wonderful album that makes more sense now than it ever did. This remastered reissue also contains demos, out-takes and two discs of live tracks.

BONNIE PRINCE BILLY

POND SCUM DOMINO

Consisting of three Peel Sessions, Pond Scum focuses on stark, mainly solo versions of songs from the early part of cult lo-fi singer-songwriter Will Oldham's career ('93 to '01). The result is a fascinating and idiosyncratic addition to his canon.

courant. More good news: the new edition restores top singalong We Are All Prostitutes to the running order. ★★★★
IAN HARRISON
Download: Justice | We Are All Prostitutes | There Are No Spectators

VARIOUS
KOMBINATION RESEARCH 100
KOMBINATION RESEARCH, OUT NOW
Clenched-jaw techno from veteran producer The Advent – and friends.

Converted to acid house in late-'80s London, Portuguese-born Cisco Ferreira ended up as in-house engineer at the Jack Trax label, where he assisted some of the era's most celebrated US producers, Marshall Jefferson and Derrick May included. His own tastes, though, leaned towards the steroid techno being forged in Europe and after a stint at Belgian label R&S he debuted his own stripped-down hybrid as The Advent. This 22-track set, drawn from Ferreira's label Kombination Research, is essentially a summation of his solo output since the late '90s, encompassing high-velocity minimalism (P.Tek), Detroit-influenced electro (Elektra Fix) and the odd industrial-edged contribution from fellow militants such as Joey Beltram (Fractals). There's no questioning the urgency, or energy, but only the hardcore will stay the distance. ★★★
RUPERT HOWE
Download: The Advent – P.Tek and Elektra Fix | Joey Beltram – Fractals

VARIOUS
STILL IN A DREAM: A STORY OF SHOEGAZE 1988-1995
CHERRY RED, OUT NOW
Five discs of fringe'd effects-pedal rock.

Yes, now-departed music weeklies first used it as a term of derision for floppy-haired bands who really liked My Bloody Valentine. But though once regarded as a hiccup between Madchester and Nirvana, the gauzy indie-rock sound dubbed shoegazing has endured. This 87-track box is a worthy primer for its classic years: providing context with precursors such as Spacemen 3, Cocteau Twins and AR Kane, it showcases such now-reactivated frontrunners as Lush, Ride and Slowdive and salutes fellow travellers such as Pale Saints, Adorable and Moose, fathoming the blank delivery/reverb aesthetic with relentless thoroughness. There's also a sense of joyous discovery with obscurities such as Japan's Coaltar Of The Deepers, Maryland's Black Tambourine and Boston's Drop Nineteens, whose beatific 1992 single Winona remains superlative. ★★★★
IAN HARRISON
Download: Lush – De-Luxe | Galaxie 500 – Tugboat | Drop Nineteens – Winona

CAMERA PRESS

The Bluetones in 1995: "bedsit-centric tales of doomed romance."

FROM HOUNSLOW, WITH LOVE

Britpop quartet's chart-topping debut about break-ups in the suburbs gets the 20th-anniversary treatment.

THE BLUETONES
EXPECTING TO FLY
3 LOOP MUSIC, OUT 19 FEBRUARY

The effects of Blur and Oasis seizing control of the musical landscape in the mid-'90s were two-fold. As well as shifting the musical goalposts in favour of homegrown acts, it encouraged a second wave of bands such as Kula Shaker, Ocean Colour Scene and Cast to look back to '60s sounds while reflecting on their own experiences.

Named after a Buffalo Springfield song and inspired by an adolescence spent beneath the Heathrow flight path – it starts with the sound of a plane taking off – The Bluetones' debut duly went to Number 1 in February 1996, knocking Oasis's (What's The Story) Morning Glory? off the top spot. Twenty years on, this combination of classic pop hooks and emotional intelligence ensures that Expecting To Fly has dated far better than might be expected. Bluetonic, Slight Return and Cut Some Rug were all Top 20 singles and they're the sound of a lovesick, surburban Stone Roses. Hugh Jones's muscular production adds a propulsive edge whenever their jangle-pop blueprint falls short (Things Change, The Fountainhead). Equally, Mark Morriss's Rizla-thin delivery might never pass muster on The Voice, but it's perfect for these bedsit-centric tales of doomed romance, summed up by Putting Out Fires where he sighs forlornly: "Losing a lover/Gaining a friend".

The wealth of unreleased material will no doubt delight completists. The 34 tracks include demos, B-sides and a rambunctious live set from Leeds in April 1996. However, it's the frazzled but cocksure atmosphere of the original album – a mirror of Britpop itself – which stays with you. A moment in time, for sure, but one well worth revisiting. ★★★★
PAUL MOODY
Download: Bluetonic | Slight Return | Carn't Be Trusted | Vampire | Putting Out Fires

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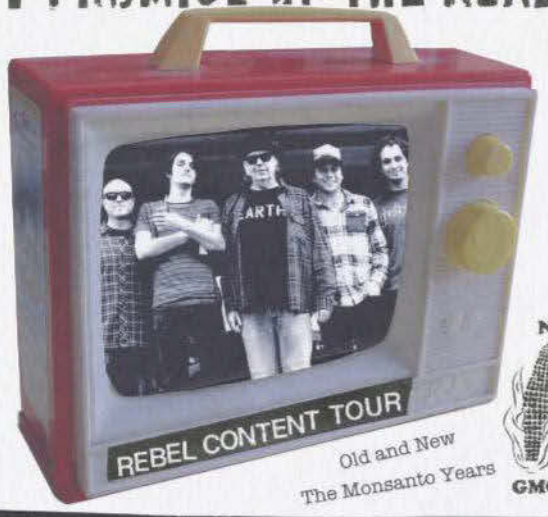

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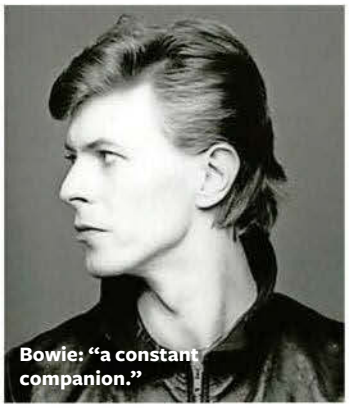
LETTER OF THE MONTH

THE PRETTIEST STAR


Bowie: "a constant companion."

On Sunday I took delivery of my copy of Blackstar, played it three times,went to bed. Eight hours later the news came that David Bowie had died, I sat in front of the TV and fought back the tears. I had no idea where this emotion came from until later in the day when I realised that Bowie had always been there – Ziggy Stardust when I was small, Scary Monsters when my musical taste was forming, Let's Dance when I met my girlfriend, Black Tie White Noise when the kids were born and now Blackstar, when my kids are leaving home and also now, Bowie has left us. Good or bad, all the LPs meant something.

I now realise that the feeling of anticipation when a new Bowie album comes out will never return, but feel thankful that he was a constant companion throughout my life, and although he had no idea of my existence, I hope I was a companion to him, like millions of others, in his incredible life. Undoubtedly the prettiest star that ever shone.

Alan Andrews, via Q Mail

(DON'T) PLAY MISTY FOR ME

Father John Misty: "snidey."

What a sarky, self-reverential hairy prick Father John Misty is! His snidey My 10 Commandments in your last issue (Q355) has really put me off the man and his music – I've had to stop listening to I Love You, Honeybear now because I can't stomach his holier-than-thou, sardonic 'tude. His instruction to "Not Do Too Much Press" because you'll become "fatigued" and "lose perspective" seems to have already happened. If you don't want to do it, Joshy, don't. Do us all a favour and free up space for someone who does!

Ian Gladstone, Woolacombe

SPINE MESSAGE Q355

"Labor Omnia Vincit" (Work Conquers All) is the motto for Altrincham Grammar School for Boys where two of The Stone Roses (Q355's cover stars), John Squire and Ian Brown, studied back in the day. Bosh!

Geoff Wardle, via Q Mail

JOKING APART

Thanks for a brilliant Killing Joke interview by Andrew Perry (Q355 Maverick). They really are the last gang of apocalyptic post-punk degenerates left in town. And for that, you were right to salute them.

Geoff Wardle, via Q Mail

YAKETY YAK

Dear Q, I trust you as arbiters of what's good and what's not, so I'm sure Yak make fantastic music, otherwise you wouldn't have been trumpeting them as a "new favourite act" (Q355 2016 preview). However, when Soppy Bollocks – or

The World of Q

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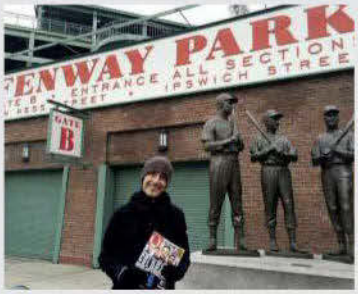
Alfred Kohl, in front of the Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe



Nicholas Poynter, outside the Boston Red Sox stadium, Massachusetts

Josh and **Jake Snowden**, Robben Island, Cape Town, South Africa

Nice stack!: the Tibo Electronics T1430 hi-fi system with speakers and rack.

Caption Competition

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That's not all, though: the Tibo ST60-4 is a sturdy rack for your TI430 system. It is made of a gloss metal frame with black toughened safety-glass shelves, which have bevelled edges for corner positioning and comes with integrated cable management. It is able to accommodate both hi-fi components and smaller TVs for home cinema set-ups.

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THIS MONTH'S CAPTION CHALLENGE

Here's a shot of Ringo Starr having a bite to eat. Send your entry – the funnier the better – including your address, to captioncomp@Qthemusic.com or on a postcard to the usual Q address. See below for more details. **Closes: 20 February 2016.**

Q354: THE WINNING CAPTION

"Usually, it's Mick who arrives with the horn."

Neil Renton from **Edinburgh** came up with this funny and wins a Yamaha MusicCast multiroom hi-fi system. Other winners: **Matthew Medhurst** from **Cheltenham**; **Daniel Sollé** from **Reculver**

To win, email your caption to: captioncomp@Qthemusic.com or post to the usual Q address before 20/2/16. One winner will be chosen by the panel. Winner will be notified, by email, 7-10 days after the closing date and must respond to Q within 14 days or another winner may be chosen. Q will not respond to questions about its chosen winner but will provide winners' names and the home towns, provided a request is made to the usual Q address and accompanied with a SAE. One entry per person and you must be over 18 and live in the UK. Prize is non-negotiable with no cash alternative. Personal data will be collected by Q and passed to prize provider to process entries. See http://www.bauerdatapromise.co.uk/ for more details. Full T&Cs apply, see http://www.bauerlegal.co.uk/competition-terms.html. Any queries, email: QMail@Qthemusic.com

whatever the singer's name is – claims that for "the majority of people... their alarm goes off at half eight" it betrays the cosseted existence of a bone idle fop who's never done a day's work in his life. Back when rock'n'roll was populated by real men, Tony Iommi had done a shift in the factory *and* lost two fingers before half past eight. *Yours, Augustus H Houlihan III, via Q Mail*

A GOOD YEAR FOR THE ROSES

Congratulations, Q, on your recent Stone Roses special (Q355). It was a timely and celebratory overview of, in my view, the best band of the past 30 years. Your profiles of Ian, John, Mani and Reni gave a real insight into what makes them tick and the peculiar chemistry between them – I mean, how could you get four such different personalities? It's what makes them and their music great, and it's no surprise their summer shows sold out so quickly. I was unlucky not to get any, but I'm going to Glasto. So fingers crossed for a headline slot there and, who knows, maybe an accompanying new album? *Andrew Statton, via Q Mail*

SUKITA

GUY GARVEY

"I DIDN'T JUST TRASH MY HOTEL ROOM, BUT THE THREE UNDERNEATH IT."

The Elbow frontman on rock-star behaviour, breakdancing and Frank Sinatra being "a twat".

When was the last time a stranger offered to buy you a drink?
It happens frequently when I'm in Manchester. Usually, it's "Mr Elbow! Mr Elbow! Let me buy you a pint!" I don't often take them up on it because it feels like taking advantage.

When was the last time you were asked what the difference is between a Guy Garvey album and an Elbow album?
About 24 hours ago! They are different entities. My record is simpler and a little brasher. Obviously, in places it sounds like Elbow because it's my voice. I'm really chuffed with it. Has there been any, "You wouldn't have got that on an Elbow record!" from the band? Oh aye!

When was the last time you were thrown out of a hotel?
Not since I flooded London's K West in 2001. It was the day after we signed to V2 Records. I drank too much, ran a bath... and ran and ran and ran a bath and flooded the floor beneath. I've stayed there since but they always put me on the lowest floor possible because I didn't just trash my room, but the three underneath it.

When was the last time you got a tattoo?
I've only got one and it was three months ago. It's the worker bee, the symbol of Greater Manchester. My friend Hannah and I both had the same tattoo done. Hers is on her ribs and mine's on my arm. Hannah went first and didn't make a sound, so I couldn't really squeal like I wanted to. I had to man up.

When was the last time you used the words, "Don't you know who I am?"
Once! My mate Bob was having a stag do in Lisbon and they wouldn't let our group in a club, so they all went, "Play the Elbow card!" I never do, but they talked me into it. I went to the bouncer: "I'm the lead singer of Elbow, it's my mate's stag do and they're all really nice lads." He just shook his head. Then the rest of them started laughing at me. Bastards.

When was the last time you breakdanced?
[Laughs] That was fucking genius! *[Elbow posed as breakdancers for a Q feature in 2003]* I've talked about breakdancing, but I've never done it in my life! I remember after we did the piece in Q, money changed hands in Snow Patrol over whether or not we were actual breakdancers. Some of them were convinced.

When was the last time someone told you they played your song at their wedding?
It happens a lot. Most nights out in town someone will say they've been to a wedding where One Day Like This or Mirrorball was played. It's always flattering though. I never expected it, though I did always have the ambition of writing a song to replace Frank Sinatra's My Way because I hate it. That wasn't the intention with One Day Like This, but it's pushed it out at weddings which is great because his song is basically: "I was a total twat!" Q

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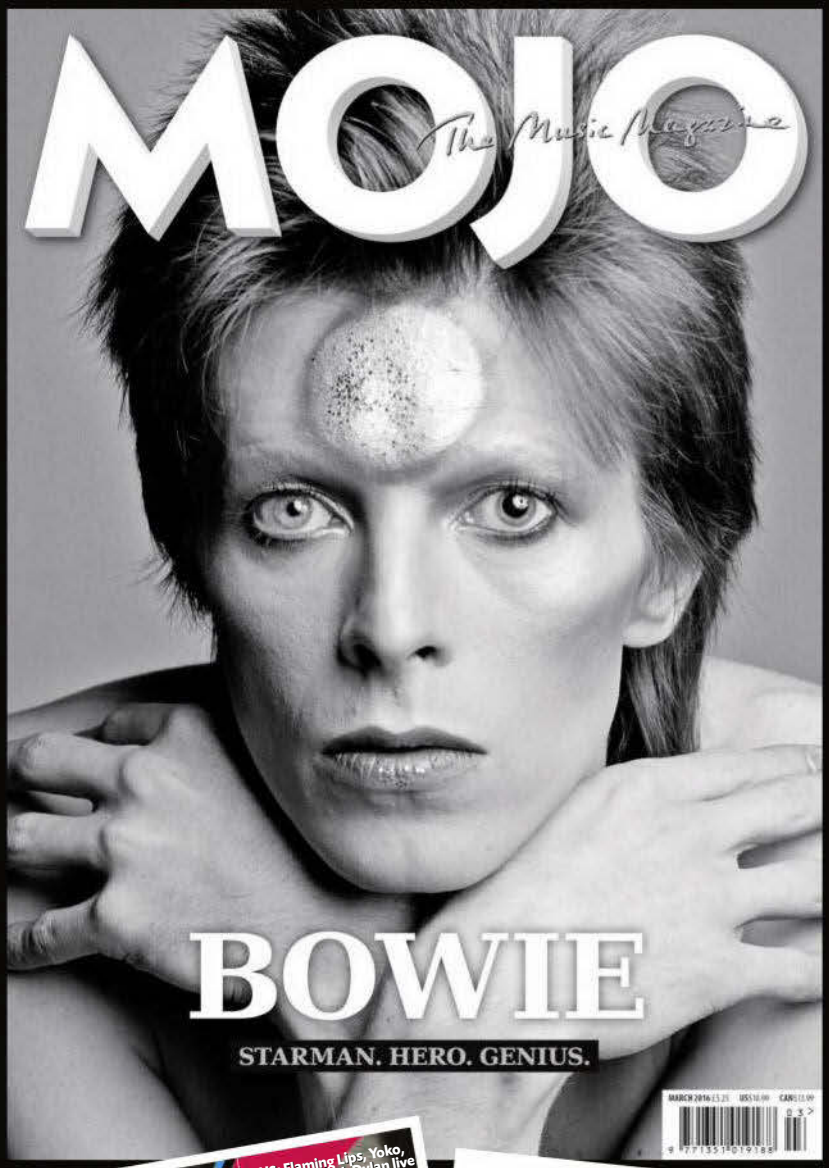

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